

Victor Dragunsky
**THE ADVENTURES
OF DENNIS**



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by **Victor Dragunsky**

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TWENTY YEARS UNDER THE BED

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THINGS I LIKE...

I like to lie on my stomach, slung over Daddy's knee, with my arms and legs dangling like wash on a line. I like to play chess, checkers and dominoes, but only if I win. If I don't, I don't.

I like to listen to a beetle scratching inside a box. And on Sundays I like to crawl into bed beside Daddy so we can talk about our dog. As soon as we move to a bigger apartment we're going to buy a dog and train it, and feed it, and it'll be a very intelligent and bouncy dog, and it'll steal lump sugar, and I'll wipe up all its puddles, and it'll follow me around like a devoted dog.

I also like to watch TV, no matter what the program's about.

I like to breathe into Mommy's ear. But most of all I like to sing, and I always sing very loudly.

I love stories about Red Army cavalymen who always win their battles.

I like to stand in front of the mirror and make faces like a Punch and Judy show. I also like sardines.

I like to read stories about Kanchil. Kanchil is a small, smart, naughty gazelle with quick eyes and tiny horns, and shiny pink hooves. When we move to a bigger apartment we'll buy a gazelle, and it'll live in the bathroom.

I like to swim where it's shallow so I can hold onto the sandy bottom.

At parades I like to wave a little red flag and blow a tin horn.

I like to call people up on the telephone.

I like to hammer and saw, and I can make clay heads of warriors and bison. I also made a clay wood grouse and a big cannon. I like to give everything I make away as gifts.

I like to chew on something when I read.

I like company.

I also love grass snakes, lizards and frogs. They're so quick. Whenever I catch one I carry it around in my pocket. I like to keep a grass snake on the table when I'm having lunch. I like to hear Gran scream: "Take that disgusting thing away!" and then dash out of the kitchen.

I like to laugh. Sometimes I don't feel like laughing at all, but I make myself laugh. I force myself to, and before you know it, everything really does seem funny.

I like to hop and skip when I'm feeling good. One day Daddy and I went to the Zoo, and I was hopping and skipping around him on the street.

"What's this all about?" he said.

"I'm skipping because you're my daddy!"

He understood.

I like to go to the Zoo. There are wonderful elephants there. And a baby elephant, too. When we move to a bigger apartment we'll buy a baby elephant. I'll build him a garage.

I like to stand in back of a car when the motor's running and smell the gasoline fumes.

I like to go to an ice cream parlor and eat ice cream and drink soda pop. The pop sends prickles up my nose and makes my eyes tear.

When I run down the hall I like to stamp my feet and make as much noise as I can.

I love horses, because they have such kind and beautiful faces. I like so many things!



...AND THINGS I DON'T

If there's anything I hate it's going to the dentist. As soon as I see the dentist's chair I feel like zooming off to the other end of the world. I also hate having to stand up on a chair and recite when we have company.

I don't like the times Mommy and Daddy go to the theatre.

I hate a soft-boiled egg that's broken into a cup and has bread crumbled into it and then I have to eat it.

I don't like the days on which we meet Aunt Rita when Mommy and I go out for a walk. They start talking and I never know what to do.

I don't like to wear my new suit, because it makes me feel so stiff.

When we play Reds and Whites I don't like to be a White. I drop out of the game if I am. When I'm a Red I don't like to be taken prisoner. I escape anyway.

I don't like to lose.

I don't like to play ring-around-a-rosie at birthday parties, because I'm not a baby.

I don't like stuck-up people.

I hate to have iodine put on my finger on top of having cut it in the first place.

I don't like to hear loud noises when I'm trying to sleep.

I hate boys and girls who speak in grown-up voices over the radio.

WHEN I WAS LITTLE

When I was little I was a poor eater. I'd take a mouthful of something and keep the food behind my cheek. Then Mommy'd say:

"Chew your food properly and swallow it!"

Mommy'd tell me stories while I ate. One day she told me the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

"Once upon a time there was a girl named Little Red Riding Hood... Chew your food!"

I chewed. Mommy continued.

"Her mother gave her a basket of food to take to her grandmother. So Little Red Riding Hood set out... Come on, chew!"

I chewed and Mommy continued.

"And then the wolf swallowed her grandmother... Come on, chew! Did you swallow it? And then the wolf swallowed Little Red Riding Hood."

I chewed away obediently.

"Just then some hunters came to the cottage," Mommy said. "Come on, chew! Did you swallow it? And they killed the big bad wolf. Then they slit open the wolf's stomach and there were Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother. They were both alive!"

"That's because the wolf didn't chew them properly," I said.



THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

Grownups often ask children stupid questions. You'd think they were all in on it, as if they'd all learned the same questions to ask. I'm so used to this by now that I can tell you what'll happen if I'm introduced to a grownup. It'll go like this.

The bell will ring. Mommy will open the door. There'll be a lot of mumble-jumble and then some grownup I've never seen before will come in. He'll rub his hands, his ears, his glasses. When he finally puts them back on he'll see me, and even though he knows all about me and what my name is he'll grip my shoulder hard, shake me and say,

"Well, Dennis, what's your name?"

If I were rude I'd say, "Why're you asking me such a stupid question if you know the answer anyway? You just said my name."

But I'm polite. That's why I'll pretend I didn't notice and smile sourly, and look away and say: "Dennis."

Then he pops the next question: "And how old are you?"

As if he can't tell I'm not thirty or forty years old. He can see how big I am and should know I'm seven, or maybe eight at the most, so why ask? But he has his own grown-up ideas, so he'll go on annoying me. "Hm? How old are you? Hm?"

And I'll say, "Seven-and-a-half."

His eyes'll get big and he'll throw up his hands as if I'd just told him I was a hundred and sixty-one yesterday. He'll moan like all his teeth ache and cry,

"Oh, my! Seven-and-a-half! Oh, my!" But he'll finally stop moaning so's I won't burst out crying, what with feeling so sorry for him, and so's I'll see it's all a big joke. Then he'll poke two fingers into my stomach real hard and say in a man-to-man voice,

"Be ready for the army soon, won't you?"



Then he'll start again from the beginning. He'll shake his head and say to Mommy and Daddy, "Imagine! Just imagine! Why, he's already seven-and-a-half! It's unbelievable!" Then he'll turn to me and add, "Why, I remember you when you were still in diapers!" And he'll hold his hands about twenty centimeters apart to show me how big I was then. I'd like to say that I know for certain I was fifty-one centimeters long when I was born. Mommy has a piece of paper that says so. It's called a birth certificate.

But I don't get mad at him. They're all like that. Next he's supposed to look like he's thinking. And he does. You bet your life he does. He'll drop his head on his chest like he's fallen asleep. That's when I try to wriggle out of his grip. Nothing doing. He was just trying to remember what other questions there were lying around in his pocket. When he finally does he'll give you a big smile and say,

"Oh, yes! What do you want to be? Hm? What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I want to be a spelunker, but I know this'll bore him silly. He won't understand me, and it's not what he's expecting. So, not to get him all confused, I say, "I want to be an ice cream man. Then I can eat ice cream every day."

The man'll look real happy. Everything's coming along fine. He'll slap me on the back (real hard) and say in a fatherly tone, "That's right! That's fine! Good for you!"

Poor me. I think the game's finally over and try backing away from him, because

I'm in a hurry, I have homework to do and a lot of other things besides, but he'll notice me trying to break loose and will clutch me harder than ever. That's called using brute force. When I finally get tired of struggling he'll ask me the main question:

"Now you tell me this, my little friend," he'll say and something sneaky'll creep into his voice. "Tell me whom you love best, Mommy or Daddy?"

That's not tactful at all. Especially since both Mommy and Daddy are in the room. I'll have to wriggle out of it.

"Mikhail Tahl," I'll say.

He'll begin to laugh. He really enjoys stupid answers like that. And he'll repeat it about a hundred times. "Mikhail Tahl! The famous chess player! Ha-ha-ha! How's that for an answer? What d'you say to that, you lucky parents?"

And he'll go on whooping for half an hour more, and Mommy and Daddy'll laugh, too. And I'll be ashamed of them and of myself. And I'll promise myself that later on, when the nightmare's finally over, I'll sneak Mommy a kiss when Daddy isn't looking and Daddy a kiss when Mommy isn't looking. Because I love both of them. That's the honest truth. It's as simple as that, but for some reason grownups don't like this kind of an answer. I tried to answer honestly a couple of times and always saw how disappointed they were. It was as if they were saying to themselves: "Ah... What a strange reply. So he likes them both equally well. What a strange boy he is."

That's why I lie and say I like the famous chess player Mikhail Tahl best. It gives them a laugh. Meanwhile, I can try to break free of my new friend's steel claws again. No go. He's even stronger than an ox. Besides, he has another little question up his sleeve, but I can tell by his voice that we're coming to the end now. It'll be the best question of all. Sort of like a question for desert. He'll suddenly look real scared and say,

"Why didn't you wash your face this morning?"

I washed my face like I always do, but I know what's coming. What I don't know is why they never get tired of such a tattered old game. Anyway, to bring things to a quicker end I'll clutch my face and say, "Where? Where's the dirt?"

Bull's eye! Quick as a flash he'll hand me that old garbage:

"What about your eyes?" he'll say in a sneaky voice. "Why're your eyes so black? You forgot to wash them! You go do that right away."

And he'll finally let me go. Which means I'm free to get back to all the things I have to do.

These new acquaintances sure are hard on me. But what can I do? It's a stage all children have to go through.

There's nothing you can do about it.

A GREAT SINGER'S FAME

I have all "A"s in my report card and only one "B" for penmanship. Which means I have straight "A"s, except for a "C" in singing. This is how I got it.

It was during our singing lesson. At first, we all sang "The White Birch Tree". It sounded very nice, but Boris Sergeyevich, our singing teacher, kept wincing and saying,

"Draw out your vowels!"

We started drawing out our vowels, but he clapped for silence and said, "You sound like cats yowling! I'll go over it with each one of you in-di-vi-dually."

That means one at a time.

He called on Misha first. Misha went over to the piano and whispered something to him. Then Boris Sergeyevich began to play and Misha began to sing in a piping voice:

See the snowflakes flutter down
On the sparkling ice.

He was a scream. He sounded just like our kitten Murzik meow-ing. That was no way to sing. You could hardly hear him. I burst out laughing.

Boris Sergeyevich gave Misha an "A", looked at me and said,

"All right, my laughing friend, let's hear you now."

I ran up to the piano.

"What'll you sing?" he asked politely.

"A Civil War song. 'Budyonny, Lead Us into Battle.'"

Boris Sergeyevich shook his head and began to play, but I stopped him right away.

"Please play it louder."

"We won't be able to hear you then."

"Sure, you will."

He started playing again. I took a deep breath and began to sing:

A red flag waves
In the bright blue sky...

I really like that song. I can just see the bright blue sky on a hot day. And the horses' hooves on the road, and their beautiful purple eyes, and the red flag waving in the wind.

I shut my eyes tight from the glory of it all and shouted at the top of my voice:

We're galloping off
Towards the enemy lines!

I was singing so well I'm sure people could hear me across the street.

I pressed my fists into my stomach. This made my voice so loud I nearly burst.

We're coming like an avalanche!

I stopped, because I was all perspired and my knees were trembling.

Boris Sergeyevich kept on playing, but he was scrunched over the piano and his shoulders were shaking.

"How's that?" I asked.

"Monstrous!" He'd never said such a nice thing about anyone before.

"It's a great song, isn't it?"

"Yes." He dabbed at his eyes with his hankie.



"Too bad you played it so quiet. It would've sounded much better if you'd played it louder."

"I'll bear that in mind. Did it strike you, though, that I was playing one song and you were singing something slightly different?"

"No. It doesn't really matter. But you still should've played it louder."

"Well, then, since you didn't notice the difference, I'll give you a 'C'. For effort."

You could've knocked me over with a feather. He couldn't mean it! A "C" was no mark for such fine singing. We could barely hear Misha singing and he got an "A". So I said,

"I'll rest up a few minutes, Boris Sergeyevich, and then I'll sing it even louder. You'll see. It's because I didn't have much for breakfast. Otherwise I could've sung it so loud I'd've made everyone deaf. I know another song. Whenever I sing it at home all the neighbors come running to see what's the matter."

"And what song is that?"

"A very sad one." I began to sing it:

I loved you...
And my love may still not...

But Boris Sergeyevich shut me up in a minute. "All right. That's enough. We'll discuss it next time."

Then the bell rang for recess.

Mommy was waiting for me downstairs. We were leaving when Boris Sergeyevich came up to us. He was smiling.

"Your son may grow up to be as famous as Lobachevsky or Mendeleyev. Or Surikov, or Koltsov. I won't be surprised if he becomes a famous athlete or boxer, but there's one thing I can vouch for: he'll never share Ivan Kozlovsky's fame as a singer. Never," he said.

Mommy turned all red and said, "You never can tell!"

All the way home I kept wondering whether Ivan Kozlovsky really sings louder than me.

WHO EVER HEARD OF IT?

Lucy, our Young Pioneer leader, came over to me during recess and said, "D'you think you can sing something at our next school recital? We've decided to have a number with two first-graders as a comedy team. It'll be a satire. How about it?"

"Sure! But what's a satire?"

"Well, you know, there are all sorts of things that need improving. Like lazy pupils and poor achievers. Understand? If we made fun of them publicly and everybody laughs, it'll make them reform."

"They're not criminals. They're just lazy."

"Reform is just a way of saying it. Actually, it'll make them stop and think. They'll feel ashamed of themselves, and then they'll improve. Understand? Anyway, I need your answer now: yes or no?"

"All right. Yes."

"D'you have a partner?"

"No."

"You mean you don't have any friends?"

"Sure, I do. Misha's my friend. But I don't have a partner."

She smiled again. "That's practically the same thing. Is he musical?"

"No, he's ordinary."

"Can he sing?"

"You can hardly hear him. But don't worry, I'll teach him to sing real loud."

She seemed pleased.

"Bring him along to assembly after school. We're having a rehearsal."

I dashed off to look for Misha. He was in the cafeteria, eating a sausage.

"Want to be a comedian, Misha?"

"Wait a minute. Wait till I finish this."

I stood watching him eat. He's very skinny. The sausage looked thicker than his neck. He was biting off pieces instead of cutting it up, and the skin cracked loudly each time he bit into it. That made hot, delicious juice run out of it. It made me so hungry I asked for a sausage, too.

The cook gave me one on a plate. I didn't want Misha to finish his before I did, because it wouldn't be as tasty if I had to eat it alone, so I started biting into mine without cutting it up, either. The hot, delicious juice burst out of my sausage, too. We sat there watching each other and smiling as we chewed away, burning our fingers on the hot sausages.

Then I told Misha we were going to be a comedy team. He was all for it. We could barely wait till school was out.

Lucy was waiting for us. So was a boy who looked like he was probably in the fourth grade. He had small ears and huge eyes.

"Here they are," Lucy said. "This is Andrei Shestakov, our school poet."

Misha and I said hello and then turned away, so he wouldn't think he was so special.

"Are these the actors?" the poet asked Lucy.

"Yes."

"Couldn't you find anything bigger?"

"It's just what we need."

Just then Boris Sergeyevich came in. He went straight to the piano and sat down. "Let's begin. Where are the stanzas?"

Andrei took a slip of paper from his pocket. "Here. I took the rhyme and meter

from Marshak's poem about the donkey, the old man and his grandson. You know, 'Who ever heard of it?'"

Boris Sergeyevich nodded. "Read it aloud."

Andrei read his poem.

Vasily's father is good at arithmetic,
He does his son's homework for him each day.
Who ever heard of it, who ever dreamed of it?
Father does homework while sonny-boy plays!

Misha and I giggled. It was true. Lots of kids asked their parents to do their homework for them and then handed it in as if they were real smart and had done it themselves. Then, when they were called on to do a problem in class, they'd get a "D". Everybody knew it. Good for Andrei! That'd show them. Meanwhile, he was reading the next stanza and looking very serious.

See the bright chalk squares all over the sidewalk here,
Tanya and Manya are hopping again.
Who ever heard of it, who ever dreamed of it?
Lessons have started, but what's it to them?

That was great! Andrei was real good, just like Pushkin.

"Not bad at all," Boris Sergeyevich said. "The music'll be very simple, something like this." He took the slip of paper from Andrei, played an accompaniment and sang the whole song through. It sounded so good we all clapped.

"Who will sing it?" he asked.

Lucy pointed at Misha and me. "They will."

"I see. Misha has a good ear for music, but Dennis doesn't carry a tune too well."

"But I can sing very loud," I said.

We began rehearsing. We must've repeated that song fifty or a thousand times. I kept shouting it real loud, and everybody kept trying to shush me up.

"Don't be nervous! Not so loud! Take it easy!" they said.

Andrei was more nervous than anybody, and he was making me nervous. Still, I kept singing as loud as I could. That's because real singing should be loud.

A couple of days later there was a notice on the bulletin board. This is what it said:

ATTENTION!
There will be a presentation
in the assembly hall
TODAY
during the long recess.
A duo of first-graders
in a satirical skit Topical Subjects
EVERYONE WELCOME!

My heart skipped a beat. I raced off to my classroom. Misha was there, looking out of the window.

"We're on today!"

"I don't feel good," he mumbled.

I was dumbfounded. He couldn't mean it. After all, we'd rehearsed for so long. What about Lucy and Boris Sergeyevich? And Andrei? And what about all the kids? They'd all see the notice and they'd all be sure to come.

"Are you crazy? How can you let everybody down?"

"I think I've got a stomach ache." He sounded awful.

"That's because you're scared. I've got one, too, but I'm not backing out."

Misha looked thoughtful. The minute the long recess started all the kids raced to the assembly hall.

Misha and I trudged along behind them, because now I didn't feel like getting up in front of everybody, either.

Just then Lucy came running over, grabbed each of us by the hand and dragged us off down the hall. My knees kept buckling. I must've caught Misha's stomach ache.

There was a space set off near the piano, and all the kids from all the classes and the teachers, too, were crowding around it.

Misha and I took our places by the piano.



Boris Sergeyevich was sitting on the piano bench. Lucy announced in a real announcer's voice:

"You will now hear a song on a topical subject. The words are by Andrei Shestakov. Our singers are the world-famous comedy team of Misha and Dennis. Let's give them a hand!"

Misha and I took a step forward. Misha was as pale as a ghost. I was feeling fine, except that my mouth felt dry and fuzzy, like I had a ball of cotton in it.

Boris Sergeyevich began to play. Misha was supposed to begin, because he sang the first two lines alone. Then I was supposed to sing the last two lines alone. Anyway, Boris Sergeyevich started to play. Misha raised his left arm like Lucy had showed him and was about to begin, but he missed his cue. Then it was my turn. I mean, according to the music. But I didn't sing my two lines, because Misha hadn't sung his.

Misha dropped his arm back into place, and Boris Sergeyevich began from the beginning, slowly and loudly. He banged on the keys three times, as he was supposed to, and on the fourth bang Misha raised his left arm again and finally began to sing:

Vasily's father is good at arithmetic,
He does his son's homework for him each day.

I was right on cue and shouted:

Who ever heard of it, who ever dreamed of it?
Father does homework while sonny-boy plays!

Everybody burst out laughing. That lifted a weight from my chest. Then Boris Sergeyevich banged on the keys three times again and on the fourth Misha raised his left arm carefully and, for some reason or other, began from the beginning again:

Vasily's father is good at arithmetic,
He does his son's homework for him each day.

I guessed right off that he'd made a mistake, but I decided to sing the rest of the stanza while we were at it, and then maybe everything would go right after that. So I sang my two lines:

Who ever heard of it, who ever dreamed of it?
Father does homework while sonny-boy plays!

Luckily, nobody made any noise, because they probably all guessed that Misha'd made a mistake and were now saying to themselves, "Oh, well, things like this happen. We'll just wait for the next stanza."

Meanwhile, the music was banging on and on. Misha looked sort of green under the gills. When the music reached the place where he was supposed to start he threw out his left arm again and began to sing like a record when the needle gets stuck in a groove, for the third time now:

Vasily's father is good at arithmetic,
He does his son's homework for him each day.

I felt like cracking him good and hard with something heavy, so I shouted angrily:

Who ever heard of it, who ever dreamed of it?
Father does homework while sonny-boy plays!

"You're nuts! Why d'you keep singing the same thing? Sing the second stanza!" I hissed.

"Nobody asked you!" he snapped and then said very politely to Boris Sergeyevich, "I'm ready, Boris Sergeyevich." Boris Sergeyevich began to play. Misha looked bolder. He raised his left arm again and, on the fourth bang, yowled as if nothing were wrong:

Vasily's father is good at arithmetic,
He does his son's homework for him each day.

The kids were squealing and shrieking. Then I noticed Andrei. He looked miserable. Lucy was all red in the face and dishevelled and was making her way through the crowd towards us. Misha stood there with his mouth hanging open as if he'd surprised himself. Meanwhile, I was belting out my half of the stanza:

Who ever heard of it, who ever dreamed of it?
Father does homework while sonny-boy plays!

It's hard to describe what was happening. While everyone was laughing so hard, Misha's face turned from green to purple. Lucy grabbed his hand and dragged him off, shouting to me over her shoulder.

"You sing it alone, Dennis! Don't let us down! Go on!"

I stood there by the piano and decided not to let them down. I was very calm, and at my cue I suddenly threw out my left arm, like Misha had, and bellowed, really amazing myself:

Vasily's father is good at arithmetic,
He does his son's homework for him each day.

I don't really remember what happened after that. It was something like an earthquake. I was sure I'd drop through the floor, but it was just everybody, all the kids and all the teachers, keeling over.

I'm surprised I didn't die. I probably would've, if not for the bell.

I'm never going to be a comedian again.

LEOPARD SPOTS

Misha and Lena and I were playing in the sandbox. We were building a rocket launching pad. We made a hole and lined it with bricks and bits of glass, leaving a space in the middle for the rocket. I brought down a pail and we put the instruments in it.

"We've got to make a side tunnel for the exhaust when the rocket's launched," Misha said.

We started digging again, but soon got tired, because there were so many stones in the sand.

"Let's take a break," Lena said.

"Let's," Misha said.

So we sat down to rest.

Then Kostya came outside. He was so skinny and pale we didn't recognize him. He said hello.

"Hello, Kostya," we said.

He sat down next to us.

"Why're you so skinny? You look like a skeleton," I said.

"I had the measles."

"Are you all well now?" Lena asked.

"Yes. I've recuperated completely."

"I bet it's still catching," Misha said and moved away.

"No, it isn't. Don't worry. Yesterday the doctor said I've recuperated completely and can play with other children."

Misha moved back again.

"Did it hurt?" I asked.

"No. It was just awfully boring. All the time I was in bed everybody kept giving me decals and I kept pasting them into a scrap-book. I was bored stiff."

"It's fun to be sick," Lena said. "You always get presents when you're sick."

"You get presents when you're well, too. Like on your birthday or at New Year's," Misha said.

"Or when you're promoted to the next grade and have 'A's in your report card," I said.

"I don't get presents because I've got a pack of 'C's," Misha said. "And you don't get any real good presents when you have the measles, because everything you play with has to be burned in the incinerator after. The measles aren't any fun."

"Is any other kind of sickness fun?" Kostya asked.

"Sure," I said. "Chicken pox, for instance. It's a fine sickness. When I had it Mommy dabbed green medicine on every pox, all over me. I looked just like a leopard. It was great."

"It sounds nice," Kostya said.

"Hives are nice, too. They're pretty," Lena said and looked at me. That made Misha laugh.

"What's so pretty about them? Just plain old bumps. Hives aren't any fun. I like the grippe best. When you have the grippe you get tea and raspberry jam. You can eat as much jam as you want, and nobody'll say a word. Once I had a whole jar of jam. My Mommy couldn't believe it, what with having such a high fever and such a good appetite. My grandma said there were all kinds of grippe and that mine was a new kind. She said I should have as much as I wanted, 'cause my system needed it. And Mommy gave me more, but I couldn't



eat it. What a shame! It was probably because of the grippe." He rested his cheek on his fist and thought it over some more.

"The grippe's a good kind of sickness, but tonsils is much better," I said.

"Why?"

"Because when you have your tonsils out you have lots of fruit juice and puddings. That's better than jam."

"How do you get tonsils?" Lena asked.

"From a running nose. They grow in your nose like mushrooms, because it's damp there."

Misha sighed and said, "A running nose is no fun. You get nose-drops for it and they only make it run worse."

"You can drink kerosene," I said. "And it won't make your breath smell."

"Why'd you want to drink kerosene?"

"Not really swallow it, but hold it in your mouth. A magician'll get a mouthful of it and then blow the kerosene out on a flaming stick. It makes the stick flame up like a torch. It's beautiful. But the magician knows how to do it. There's a trick to it. If you don't know how to do it you might as well not try. You won't do it right anyway."

"I saw a man swallow frogs in the circus," Lena said unexpectedly.

"And rats, too! Just for laughs," Kostya said.

"And crocodiles!" Misha added.

I nearly fell over. What a lie! Everybody knows crocodiles are made out of tough crocodile leather, so how can you eat them? "You must be crazy! You can't eat a crocodile, it's too tough. You'd never be able to chew it."

"Sure you could, if it's cooked."

"Huh! You'd never get a crocodile to let itself get cooked!" I shouted.

"It's got such big teeth," Lena said and she looked scared.

"Crocodiles eat their trainers every day," Kostya said.

"They do?" Lena's eyes got as round as buttons. "We were talking about nice things like hives and now we're talking about crocodiles. I hate them."

"We've talked about sicknesses enough," Misha said. "What's the use of a cough, for instance? The only good thing about it is you can stay out of school."

"That's better than nothing," Kostya said. "But you're right: everybody likes you better when you're sick. Much more."

"And they pat you and say nice words," Misha said. "When you're sick you can get anything you want. A game, or a pop gun or a soldering iron."

"That's right. The main thing is to catch something really bad. If you break a leg or your neck you can get whatever you want," I said.

"Even a bike?" Lena asked.

"You won't need a bike if you've got a broken leg," Kostya said.

"It'll grow together again," I said.

"Will it?" Kostya asked.

"Sure, it will. Won't it, Misha?"

Misha nodded. Then Lena pulled her dress down over her knees and said, "How come if you burn yourself or get a bump or a black-and-blue mark you sometimes get spanked on top of it? How come?"

"That's not fair!" I said and kicked the pail. The one with our instruments in it.

"What's the pail for?" Kostya asked.

"We're making a rocket launching pad."

"Why didn't you say so? Stop talking and let's get down to work!"

So we stopped talking and got down to work.

US, TOO

As soon as Misha and I found out that two of our cosmonauts called each other Falcon and Eagle we decided that I'd be Eagle and he'd be Falcon, because we were going to be cosmonauts anyway, and Falcon and Eagle were such fine names. We also decided that while we were waiting to get older and enroll in the school for cosmonauts we'd start training. As soon as we decided this I went straight home and started training.

I got into the shower and turned on the water, first warm and then cold. I could stand it pretty good so I decided I might as well get toughened some more and turned off the hot water altogether, leaving an icy stream. Boy oh boy! I was covered with goose pimples in a second.

I stood there in the icy shower for about half an hour or five minutes and really got toughened. While I was getting dressed I remembered the poem Gran once read me about a boy who was shivering and blue from the cold.

After lunch my nose began to run and I sneezed a couple of times.

"I'll give you an aspirin. You'll be all right by tomorrow. Get into bed," Mommy said.

That made me feel awful. I nearly began to bawl, but just then Misha shouted from downstairs,

"Eagle! Hey, Eagle! Can you hear me, Eagle?"

I ran to the window and looked out. "What d'you want, Falcon?"

"Come on out into orbit!" He meant out into the yard.

"My mother won't let me. I've got a cold."

Mommy was pulling at my legs, saying, "Don't lean over the windowsill like that! You'll fall out. Who're you talking to?"

"My friend. My space brother. You're bothering me!"

"Don't lean out like that!" she shouted.

"My mother won't let me lean out."

Misha thought this over and then smiled and said, "She's right. It'll be a test of don't-lean-i-ty!"

But I leaned out anyway and sort of whispered, "Gee, Falcon, I may have to stay in till tomorrow. No chance of escaping!"

"So what? You can be in training. Shut your eyes and lie still as if you're in an isolation chamber."

"I'll establish contact by phone this evening," I said.

"All right. You establish contact with me and I'll establish contact with you."
And he left.

I lay down on the couch, closed my eyes and started practicing not talking. Then I got up and did some calisthenics. Then I observed the Unknown through the porthole, and then Daddy came home and I had a meal of natural products. I was feeling fine. Then I began undressing for bed.

"How come you're going to bed so early?" Daddy wondered.

"You can stay up as late as you want to. I'm going to sleep."

Mommy felt my forehead and said, "The child is ill."

I didn't say anything. If they couldn't see I was in training to be a cosmonaut, what was the use explaining? They'd read it all in the papers later when the country thanked them for having brought up such a fine son.

Quite a lot of time had gone by while I'd been thinking all this and I decided it was time to establish contact by phone with Misha. I went out to the hall and dialed. Misha picked up the receiver right away. His voice sounded sort of fuzzy.

"Hello," he said.

"Is that you, Falcon?"

"What'd you say?"

"Is that you, Falcon? This is Eagle. How're things?"

He laughed, breathed into the phone and said, "That's very funny. Quit kidding. Is that you, Sonya?"

"Sonya? This is Eagle! What's the matter with you?"

"Who? What d'you mean? Who's speaking?"

"Nobody's speaking!" I said and hung up. It must have been a wrong number.

Daddy called me and I went back to my room, got undressed and into bed. Just as I was drifting off I heard a ringing. It was the telephone. Daddy went to get it. While I was looking for my slippers I could hear him saying,

"Eagle? Which Eagle? There's nobody here by that name. You have the wrong number."

It was Misha! He'd established contact! I ran out to the hall. "It's for me! I'm Eagle!"

"Falcon? This is Eagle! Roger and over!"

"What're you doing?"

"Sleeping!"

"Me, too! I nearly fell asleep and then remembered something very important. Listen, Eagle! We've got to sing something before we go to sleep. Together. So it'll be a space duet."

What an idea!



"Good for you, Falcon, Let's sing the cosmonauts' song." I began to sing. I sing very well, because I sing louder than any other kid at school. As soon as I started to sing, Mommy came running, but Daddy said,

"It's the two cosmonauts, Falcon and Eagle, singing before they go to sleep."

Meanwhile, Misha and I were singing:

*On the dusty paths of the distant stars
Our footprints will remain...*

THE MYSTERY CLEARS

I heard Mommy say to someone, "The truth will out." I asked her what it meant.

"It means that if someone does something dishonest people will find out about it sooner or later. He'll be ashamed of himself and he'll be punished. Understand? It's time for bed now."

I brushed my teeth and got into bed but couldn't fall asleep, because I kept thinking about what she'd said and wondering how the truth could out, I couldn't fall asleep for a long time. Then, when I woke up, it was morning. Daddy had gone to work. Mommy and I were alone. I brushed my teeth again and went to have my breakfast.

First, I had an egg. It wasn't too bad, because I just had the yolk. I crumbled up the white together with the shell so it wouldn't be noticeable. Then Mommy set a bowl of farina in front of me.

"I want you to eat it all. Hear me?"

"I hate farina!"

"Look at yourself! You're a bag of bones!" Mommy shouted. "You've got to put on weight."

"It makes me gag."

Then Mommy sat down beside me, put her arm around me and said, "Let's go to see the Kremlin. What d'you say?"

It sounded swell. I can't think of any place that's better than the Kremlin. I've been to the Hall of Facets and the Armory, and I stood next to the Tsar-Cannon and saw Ivan the Terrible's throne. There are so many interesting things to see there. So I said, "Sure! Let's go!"

Then Mommy smiled and said, "Fine. We'll go as soon as you finish your cereal. I'll tidy up meanwhile. Don't forget, everything down to the last spoonful."

I was alone at the kitchen table with the cereal staring at me. I slapped the

surface with my spoon. Then I salted it. Then I tasted it. It was awful. Then I decided to add some sugar. Maybe that would make it taste better. I sprinkled some sugar on it and tasted it again. It was still worse. I said I hated cereal.

Besides, it was very thick. If it had been thinner, I'd have shut my eyes tight and sipped it. So I added some hot water from the kettle. It was still slippery and sticky, and disgusting. I tried to swallow a spoonful, but my throat got all choked up and shoved the cereal back up. It was terrible. And I really wanted to go to the Kremlin.

That's when I remembered the jar of horse radish. I decided anything would go down easier with horse radish so I poured the whole jar into my cereal. When I tasted it my eyes popped out. I stopped breathing. I must've been unconscious, because I grabbed the bowl, ran over to the window and chucked the cereal out. Then I went back to the table and sat down.

Just then Mommy came back into the kitchen. She looked at my bowl and smiled. "Good for you! Not a drop left. Get up, dear. Get dressed and we'll go to the Kremlin." She kissed me.

The doorbell rang. A minute later a militiaman entered. He walked through the kitchen, looked out the window and down at the pavement. "I'd never have believed anyone could do such a thing," he said.

"What're you talking about?" Mommy demanded.

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" He seemed to be standing at attention.

"You live in a fine new house with all modern conveniences, including an incinerator, by the way. But you throw all kinds of messes out the window!"

"How dare you say such a thing? I do not!"

"Oh, you don't?" He smiled, but didn't look friendly at all. He went back to the front door, opened it and said, "Come in, please."

A man entered. The minute I saw him I knew we weren't going to go to the Kremlin after all.

The man had on a felt hat. My cereal was spread all over his hat. There was a big puddle of it in the dent in the middle, some on the brim, some on his collar, some on his shoulder and some on his left trouser leg. He was barely inside when he began speaking in snatches.

"I was going to have my picture taken ... and then this ... cereal. Farina... Piping hot. Burnt my head through my hat... How can I send my picture ... when I'm full of farina?"

Mommy looked at me. Her eyes got as green as gooseberries, That was a sure sign she was hopping mad.

"I'm so very sorry," she said in a low voice. "Please let me clean it up."

The three of them left the kitchen.

When Mommy came back alone I was too scared to look at her. I finally made myself go over to her, though.

"You were right, Mommy. The truth will out."

She looked me straight in the eye and kept on looking for a long time, and then she said, "Will you remember this for the rest of your life?"

"Yes."



THE SPYGLASS

I was sitting on the windowsill with my shirt pulled down over my knees, because Mommy was patching my pants.

"This is the limit," Mommy said and stopped stitching. "His clothes just melt away."

"Yes," Daddy said and folded his newspaper. "They do. He's forever climbing fences and trees, and roofs. I can't seem to keep him in clothes." Daddy was silent for a while. He stared hard at me and then said, "But I've finally thought of something that'll put an end to this."

"I didn't do it on purpose," I said. "You think I tore them on purpose? It just happened."

"Of course. It just happened," Mommy snapped. "Your pants are so mean they keep thinking of ways to get caught on every nail, just to upset your mother. What terrible pants you have! It just happened! Imagine!"

She could go on like that all day, because her nerves were shattered. Anybody could see that. So I said to Daddy,

"What did you think of?"

Daddy looked very stern and said to Mommy, "You've got to concentrate and invent something that'll let you keep track of your son when he's outdoors. I can't now, because I don't want to miss the soccer game, but you can easily construct a spyglass. I know you'll succeed. You have a good head on your shoulders."

Daddy went over to his big drawer for odds and ends and got out a large magnet, a small mirror with a chipped corner, some nails, a button and a few other things. He set them out on the table before her. "Here. This is all you'll need. See what you can do."

Mommy saw him to the door, came back and said I could go outside and play. When Daddy and I got back in time for lunch I saw that Mommy's hands were full of dry paste. There was a nice-looking big blue paper tube on the table. Mommy picked it up and said,

"Look, Dennis."

"What is it?"

"It's a spyglass. My own design."

"To see what's far away?"

She smiled. "Not at all. To keep an eye on you."

"How?"

"It's really very simple. I designed and made a spyglass for parents. Like the kind sailors have, except that mine is much better."

"Will you please explain the principles of construction, the functioning, et cetera," Daddy said.

Mommy stood by the table, like a teacher standing by the blackboard, and said in a voice just like a teacher's,

"Now, whenever I have to leave the house I can always keep an eye on you, Dennis. Even if I'm as far as eight kilometers away. The minute I decide I haven't seen you for a long time and want to know what you're doing, I turn it on, hold it up in the direction of our house and, guess what? I can see you as big as life."

"Excellent! It's the Cutlet-Buzzer Effect," Daddy said.

I was taken aback. I never dreamed Mommy could invent such a thing. Mommy was so slim and young, but look at what she'd invented! The Cutlet-Buzzer Effect!

"But how d'you know where our house is?" I asked.

That didn't stump her. "I've got a special magnetic compass inside that points directly to our house."

"That's the Nanny-Granny reaction," Daddy said.

"Exactly," Mommy agreed. "So you see, Dennis, anytime you climb a fence or

are someplace you shouldn't be, I'll know all about it. Right away."

"What've you got inside it? A TV screen?"

"Of course. Remember the mirror? It throws back a reflection of you right into my head. So I can know whether you're fooling around with a slingshot or are just dawdling someplace."

"It's the Sneezable-Windpipe Law in action, as could be expected," Daddy mumbled and then suddenly said, "I'd like to interrupt you for a minute, if I may. There's a question I'd like to ask."

"Yes, of course. Go right ahead," Mommy said.

"Does your spyglass run on electricity, or what?"

"Electricity."

"Be very careful then," Daddy said. "You don't want to have a short circuit. If you do, you'll have a blowout in your brains."

"There won't be any short circuit, because there's a fuse."

"That's a different story. But be on the lookout anyway. You can't fool around with electricity."

"Can you make one like it for me?" I asked. "So's I can keep an eye on you."

"What for? I assure you I don't intend to climb any fences."

"Who knows? Well, maybe you won't climb a fence, but you may cross right near a passing car. Or maybe you're a jaywalker."

"Or maybe you pick fights with the janitors, or argue with the militia," Daddy added and sighed. "Too bad we don't have a spyglass like yours to keep an eye on you."

Mommy made a face at us and said, "It's an original design and the only one of its kind, so there!" Then she stared hard at me and said, "Don't forget, I'll have my sights on you all the time from now on."

This new contraption was going to make my life pretty awful, but I didn't say anything. I just nodded and went to bed.

When I awoke the next morning and started living my new life I could see there'd be nothing but black days ahead. Life was torture now, thanks to Mommy's invention. For instance, after I'd decided that Kostya'd been getting too snotty and was due for a licking, I stopped in my tracks, because I remembered that Mommy's spyglass was trained on my back. How could I give Kostya a licking? To say nothing of the fact that I'd stopped going to the pond in the park for tadpoles. My happy, carefree life was now out of bounds.



Dull, gray days dragged on and on. I was melting away like a candle and always felt grumpy. I was probably nearing an unhappy end.

But then one day when Mommy was out and I was rummaging in my junk drawer, looking for my old inner tube, I suddenly spotted Mommy's spyglass. It was lying on the bottom of the drawer and looked rather battered. You could see Mommy hadn't used it in a long time. She'd probably forgotten all about it. I grabbed the spyglass and began taking it apart to see what was inside and figure out how it worked. Honest to goodness, there was nothing inside. It was empty!

That's when I realized they'd tricked me. Mommy hadn't invented anything. She'd just used the make-believe spyglass to scare me, and I, like a silly fool, had believed her. I was so scared of it I'd been behaving like an angel.

This made me so mad at the whole world and at Mommy and Daddy, too, that I raced outside and began fighting Kostya, then Andrei and then Lena. Even though the three of them gave me a good beating, I was happy. After we quit fighting we went up to the attic and out onto the roof. Then we climbed a couple of trees. Then we went down into the cellar and the boiler room and fooled around in the coal bin till we were blacker than soot. I felt as if I'd sprouted wings and could fly.

RIDING THE DEATH WALL

When I was very little my parents bought me a three-wheeler. I got right on it and pedalled off and wasn't a bit scared. You'd think I'd been riding a bike all my life.

"Why, he's a born sportsman," Mommy said.

"He looks all hunched up," Daddy said.

But I learned to ride well and was soon doing tricks like clowns do in the circus. I could ride backwards or lying on the seat and pedalling with my hands, or steering with one hand at a time.

I could ride sideways with my feet in the air.

I could ride sitting on the handlebars. I could ride with my eyes shut.

I could ride holding a full glass of water. In a word, I could ride every which way.

Then Uncle Zhenya changed the two rear wheels for one and converted it into a two-wheeler. I learned to ride a two-wheeler just as quickly as I'd learned to ride my three-wheeler. Soon all the kids were calling me Champ.

I pedalled away till my knees started bumping against the handlebars, which meant I'd outgrown my bike. I was waiting for the day Daddy'd buy me a bigger one.

One day a man rode a bicycle into our yard, but he wasn't pedalling. He was sputtering and buzzing like a dragonfly. I was really surprised. I'd never seen a bike riding by itself before. Motorcycles could and cars, and rockets, but not bicycles. I couldn't believe my eyes.

The man rode up to our house and stopped. He turned out to be a big boy. He leaned his bike against the rain spout and went inside. As I stood looking at his bike Misha came out.

"What're you looking at?"

"It can go by itself, understand?"

"It's my cousin's bike. It's a motor bike. Fedya's visiting. He's having tea with us."

"Is it hard to ride a motor bike?"

"It's easy as pie. You slam down on the pedal once and that starts the motor. There's enough gas in the tank to go a hundred kilometers. Its speed's twenty kilometers in half an hour."

"Gee! I wish I could ride it."

"Forget it. Fedya'll murder you."

"I know."

Then Misha looked around and said, "There's nobody looking, and you're the champ. Go on, try it! I'll help you get it started. Press down hard. That's all you have to do. Circle around the yard a couple of times and then we'll park it here again. Fedya always stays a long time, 'cause he usually has three glasses of tea. Come on!"

Misha steadied the bike while I got on. I could reach the edge of the pedal with my toe if I stretched, but that made my other leg, dangle like a piece of macaroni. I shoved off from the rain spout with my dangling macaroni-leg and Misha trotted alongside shouting,

"Come on, start the motor!"

I had to slide half-way off the seat to slam down on the pedal. Misha made something click on the handlebars. The motor began to sputter. I was off!

I was rolling along and not even pedalling, because I couldn't reach the pedals



anyway, but all I had to do was keep my balance.

The wind whistled in my ears. Everything flashed by in a circle:

the post, the gate, the bench, the swings and the downstairs door. Then the post, the gate, the bench, the swings and the door again, and once again the post and all the rest. I rode around and around, clutching the handlebars, as Misha scampered along behind.

After the third circle he shouted, "I'm tired!" and leaned against the post.

I rode on without him. I was feeling great. I made-believe I was a death wall motorcyclist like the daring lady rider I'd seen in the amusement park.

The post, Misha, the swings and the rain spout kept flashing by time and again. I was on top of the world. After a while, though, I began feeling as if there were pins and needles in my foot. Then I began feeling funny all over. My hands were damp. I wanted to stop. When I got close to Misha again I shouted, "I'm tired" Stop it!"

Misha trotted after me, shouting, "What? I can't hear you!"

"What's the matter? Are you deaf?" I shouted.

But by then Misha had dropped behind. When I came around again, I yelled,

"Stop the bike, Misha!"

He grabbed hold of the handlebars. The bike lurched and knocked him over. I kept on going. He was waiting for me by the post again. "Slam down on the brake!" he screamed.

I whizzed past and started looking for the brake, but I couldn't find it. I tried every screw on the handlebars. Nothing worked. The motor buzzed away. By now I felt as if there were a million needles stuck into my foot and leg.

"Where's the brake?"

"I forgot!"

"Come on, remember!"

"I'm trying to! Keep on going!"

"Hurry up and remember!"

I kept on circling and circling. I was so dizzy I wanted to throw up. The next time around Misha shouted,

"I can't remember! Jump!"

"I'm going to throw up!"

If I'd known it'd be like this I'd never've gotten on! I'd rather spend the rest of my life walking!

Misha was shouting again. "We need a mattress of a bed! You could ride into it and stop. D'you have a spare mattress?"

"It's part of the couch!"

"Then keep on going till you run out of gas!"

I was so mad I nearly ran him over. Why, if I had to wait till I was out of gas I might have to ride around for two more weeks, and we had tickets to a puppet show on Sunday. Besides, my leg was about to fall off. "Go get Fedya!" I yelled.

"He's having tea!"

"He can have it later!"

Misha misunderstood and shouted, "He'll murder you later!"

There they were, flashing by again: the post, the gate, the bench, the swings, the rain spout. Then backwards: the rain spout, the swings, the bench, the gate, the post. And then all scrambled: the post, the gate, the bench, the rain spout. I knew the end was near.

Suddenly someone grabbed hold of the bike. The motor stopped sputtering, and someone gave me a hard cuff. I guessed it was Misha's cousin Fedya, who'd finally finished his tea. I tried to escape but couldn't run, because my macaroni-

leg buckled. Still, I had enough sense to hop away from Fedya as fast as I could. He didn't chase me.

I wasn't mad at him for having hit me, because if he hadn't stopped me I'd probably still be circling around the yard.

TELL ME ALL ABOUT SINGAPORE

On Saturday Daddy and I went visiting our relatives who live in a suburb of Moscow. It was only a short trip by electric train. Uncle Alex and Aunt Mila were waiting for us at the station.

"Why, Dennis is all grown up." Uncle Alex said.

And Aunt Mila said, "Come, walk with me, Denny. What's in the basket?"

"Modelling clay, crayons and my guns."

She smiled. We crossed the tracks, passed the station house and walked down a dirt road with trees growing on both sides. I took off my shoes and socks and walked barefoot. The road tickled my feet, just as it had the year before when I went barefoot for the first time after the long winter and spring.

The road turned towards the river. I could smell the water and something sweet. I hopped and skipped and shouted.

"See our bucking bronco!" Aunt Mila said.

It was dark when we reached their cottage. We were going to have tea on the terrace. A cup just as big as everyone else's was set before me.

"You know," Uncle Alex said to Daddy, "Khariton will be staying over with us a day. He's arriving at midnight tonight and will stay till tomorrow night."

Daddy looked excited. "Well, Dennis, my cousin Khariton will be here tonight. He's been wanting to meet you for a long time."

"How come I don't know him?"

"That's because he lives in the Far North and hardly ever comes to Moscow," Aunt Mila replied.

"Who is he?" I said.

"The captain of a big ship," Uncle Alex said in a very mysterious voice.

A shiver went down my back. Indeed! Daddy's second cousin was a real, live captain of a real ship and I never even knew it! That was just like Daddy: he always seems to remember the most important things by accident.

"Why didn't you tell me about him before, Daddy? I won't shine your shoes for you any more."

Aunt Mila laughed. I noticed that she laughed a lot and even when there was no reason to. This was one of the times when there was no reason to.

"I told you all about him two years ago when he got back from Singapore," Daddy said, "but you were still very little then and probably forgot. Never mind. Go to bed. You'll see him tomorrow."

Aunt Mila took my hand and led me into the house. We walked through a small room and then came into another one just like it. There was a narrow couch in the corner. A large flowered screen stood by the window.

"This is your bed. Get undressed. I'll put your basket and pistols on the floor here."

"Where'll Daddy sleep?"

"Probably on the terrace. You know he's a fresh-air fiend. Don't tell me you're frightened!"

"Not a bit." I got undressed and got into bed.

"Go to sleep, dear. We'll be in the next room," she said and tiptoed out.

I pulled the quilt up to my chin. I was lying there, listening to the grownups on the terrace talking in low voices and laughing, and even though I was sleepy I kept thinking of the captain.

I wondered what kind of a beard he had. Did it really grow right out of his neck like I'd seen on a picture once? And what kind of a pipe did he smoke? Did it have a straight stem or a curved one? And what about his dagger? Would it be inscribed or not? I knew that captains were often given inscribed daggers for valor. Naturally. During their voyages they're forever crashing into icebergs or having to face huge whales or polar bears, or else they have to rescue

shipwrecked ships and passengers. All this calls for courage. Otherwise the captain and the crew would perish and the ship would be lost. What a shame if a ship like the atomic ice-breaker Lenin sank.

Then again, captains don't always sail around in the northern seas. Some captains sail to Africa and keep pet monkeys or mongooses, the kind that kill snakes. Daddy's cousin Khariton had been to Singapore. What a mysterious name: Sing-a-pore! I would ask him to tell me all about Singapore, about the people who lived there, and the boys, and the kind of boats they sailed. Thinking about all this, I didn't notice when I dropped off to sleep.

I was awakened in the middle of the night by a terrible growling and decided a dog was in the room and didn't like the idea of me being there, too. It was growling fiercely behind the flowered screen. I thought I could see its snarling fangs in the dark. I wanted to call Daddy, but remembered he was sleeping far away on the terrace. Then I remembered I'd never been scared of dogs, so there was no reason to be scared of them now, either. After all, I was nearly eight.

"Go to sleep, Spot!" I shouted.

The dog stopped growling.

I was lying there in the dark with my eyes wide open. I couldn't see anything out of the window, because it was still dark. All I could make out was a branch that looked like a camel sitting back on its haunches like a dog. I made a fold in the quilt to block my view of the window and began doing the sevens in the multiplication table, because that's something that always puts me to sleep. Sure enough: by the time I got to seven times seven I was feeling woozy and nearly fell asleep, but just then the dog in the corner behind the screen began growling again. Oh, how it growled! It was a hundred times more scary than it had been before. Something lurched inside of me, but I shouted again,



"Lie still, Spot! Go to sleep this minute!"

It stopped growling for a second. That's when I remembered my basket on the floor and the picnic lunch Mommy had put in it for me. I decided that if I gave

the dog something to eat it might not feel so mean and would stop growling at me. So I sat up in bed and poked around in my basket. I couldn't see anything in the dark, but I found a meatball and two hard boiled eggs. I wasn't the least bit sorry to part with them, because I hate eggs anyway. As soon as the dog started growling again I tossed the eggs to it over the screen.

"Go on, eat them! Go to sleep!"

It shut up for a while and then suddenly roared. So I figured the dog didn't like eggs, either. Then I threw it the meatball. I could hear it land on the dog with a plop. It chomped and stopped growling.

"Good boy. Now go to sleep. This minute!" It was making buffing sounds, but at least it wasn't growling any more. I pulled the quilt over my head and fell asleep.

Bright sunbeams woke me up the next morning. I jumped out of bed and ran to the terrace. Daddy, Uncle Alex and Aunt Mila were at the table. There was a bowl of red radishes on the white cloth. It looked very beautiful. Seeing everyone looking so fresh and shiny made me feel great. I ran down the steps and around to the shady side of the house. Where the outdoor sink was. The ground was cold there and the water that came out of the spigot was icy. I splashed around till I was frozen. Then I raced back to the terrace. While waiting for breakfast, I crunched on a radish and then had some black bread that I salted. I was so happy I could've eaten radishes all day. Then I remembered the most important thing.

"But where's the captain? Were you fooling?"

Aunt Mila laughed, but Uncle Alex said,

"Imagine! You shared a room with him last night and didn't even know it. Wait a minute. I'll wake him up or he'll sleep the day away. He's tired after his long trip."

Just then a huge man with a weatherbeaten face and green eyes came out onto the terrace. He had no beard at all. The man came over to us and said in a terribly deep voice, "Good morning! Who's this? You mean this is Dennis?"

He had such a booming voice I wondered where he kept it.

"Yes, this handful of freckles is Dennis. Here's your long-awaited captain, Dennis," Daddy said.

I jumped up.

"Hello!" the captain said and offered me his hand. I shook it. It was as hard as a rock.

The captain was very nice-looking, even though he did have a scary voice. But where was his dagger? He shouldn't have come out in his slacks and polo shirt. And what about his pipe? I didn't care what kind of a pipe it was, I just wished he had one.

"Did you sleep well, Khariton?" Aunt Mila asked.

"No. I don't know what it was. Someone kept shouting at me all night long. Just as I'd drop off somebody'd shout: 'Go to sleep! Immediately!' But that only woke me up again. I was so tired after five days' travelling that I'd drift off again, but just as I'd be about to fall asleep again, somebody'd shout: 'Lie still! Go to sleep!' To top it all, food started dropping on me. I think it was eggs first, and then I was sure I could smell meat. I couldn't make one of the words out. It sounded like 'scat'."

"It was 'Spot'," I said. "'Spot', not 'scat'. I thought there was a dog in back of the screen, 'cause it was growling something awful."

"I wasn't growling. I must've been snoring."

It was terrible. I knew we could never be friends now. I stood at attention and said, "It was just like growling. And I must've been a little scared."

"At ease. Sit down," the captain said.

I sat down. My eyes stung. I couldn't look at him. Nobody said a word. Then he said,

"I want you to know I'm not angry at all."

Still, I couldn't face him. Then he said, "I swear by my engraved dagger."

He said it in such a friendly voice that I heaved a sigh, looked at him and said,
"Will you tell me all about Singapore?"

A PERSON SHOULD HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR

One day Misha and I were doing our homework. While we were copying our assignment into our notebooks I was telling Misha all about lemurs. I told him about their huge glassy eyes that were as big as saucers and also that I'd seen a picture of one holding a fountain pen. The lemur was real small and very cute.

"Did you copy it all out?" Misha asked.

"Yes."

"Now you check my notebook and I'll check yours."

We exchanged notebooks.

I started reading and began to laugh. Misha was laughing, too.

"What's so funny?" I said.

"I'm laughing at the way you wrote some of the words. Why're you laughing?"

"That's why I'm laughing, too, I mean the way you wrote this. Listen: 'The fost sat in.' What's it supposed to mean?"

Misha turned red. "I meant 'The frost set in.' But look at what you wrote! 'It was witer.' You should've written 'winter'. We'd better copy it out again. Its all the lemurs' fault."

After we'd copied the sentences out again I said, "Let's think up problems to solve."

"All right."

That's when Daddy came home. He looked in on us and said, "Hello, scholars."

"Daddy, listen to the problem I've thought up for Misha: I've two apples, but there's three of us. How can we divide them evenly?"

Daddy pulled up a chair.

Misha frowned. He was thinking hard. Daddy didn't frown, but he was thinking hard, too. They kept thinking for a long time.

"Give up, Misha?" I said.

"Yes."

"You've got to make applesauce if you want to divide them evenly." I burst out laughing. "Aunt Mila told me this one."

Misha pouted. Then Daddy squinted and said,

"If you're so smart, Dennis, I'll ask you one."

"Go ahead."

Daddy walked up and down. Then he said, "Listen carefully. There's a boy who's in 1B. His family consists of five people. His mother gets up at 7 a.m. and spends ten minutes dressing. His father takes five minutes to brush his teeth. His grandmother goes to the grocer's and is away for as long as it takes his mother to dress and his father to brush his teeth. His grandfather reads the paper for as long as his grandmother is out shopping, minus the time his mother's dressing.

"All together they try to wake the boy up in time for school every morning. This takes as long as grandfather reads the paper and grandmother goes shopping.

"When the boy in 1B finally wakes up he yawns and stretches for as long as it takes his mother to dress and his father to brush his teeth. It then takes him as long to wash up as it takes his grandfather to read the paper, divided by the time his grandmother goes shopping. He's as many minutes late for school as he's spent yawning and stretching, plus washing up, minus his mother's getting up, multiplied by his father's brushing his teeth.

"The question is: who is the boy in 1B and what's in store for him if he doesn't change his ways?"

Daddy stopped in the middle of the room and looked at me. Misha burst out laughing. Soon they were both looking at me and laughing.

"I can't solve it straight off 'cause we didn't study that kind of arithmetic yet." I left the room and went out into the hall. I'd guessed what the answer was: it was a lazy boy who'd soon be expelled from school. In the hall I hid behind the coats on the coat rack. I was thinking that if the problem was all about me it wasn't true, because I don't really dawdle in the mornings. And then I decided that if Daddy was going to make up stories, like that about me I wouldn't be a burden to them any longer and would leave home for good.



I could go off to some town far away. There were lots of jobs out there in the wilderness and they needed people, especially young people. I'd be conquering the wilderness, and one day Daddy would come out there with a delegation and he'd see me, and I'd stop for a minute and say, "Hello, Daddy." And then I'd go on conquering.

"Mommy sends her love," he'd say.

And I'd say, "Thanks. How is she?"

And he'd say, "All right."

And I'd say, "She's probably forgotten all about her only son."

And he'd say, "She has not! She's lost thirty-seven kilos worrying! You can't imagine how she misses you."

I had no time to think of a good answer to that, because just then one of the coats fell on me. And then Daddy came out to the hall.

"So that's where you are! What's wrong with your eyes? Did you think I meant you?" He picked up the coat, hung it back up again and said, "I made that up. There's no such boy. Not in your class and no place else in the world."

Daddy took both my hands and pulled me out from behind the coats. He looked at me again and smiled. "A person should have a sense of humor." His eyes were smiling, too. "It was a funny problem, wasn't it? Go on, let's see you laugh."

And I began to laugh. And he did, too. And then we went back to the living room.

CHICKIE-BRICKIE

I nearly died a few days ago. I mean died laughing. It was all on account of Misha.

Daddy said, "We're going to graze on the meadow tomorrow, Dennis. Mommy, you and me. Would you like to invite anyone along?"

"Sure. Misha."

"Will his parents let him go?" Mommy asked. "Sure they will if he's going with us. I'll invite him right now." I dashed upstairs to Misha's house. When I came in I said hello.

His mother didn't say anything to me, but she did speak to Misha's father.

"See what nice manners Dennis has? I wish our son had the same," she said.

I told them we were inviting Misha to go to the country with us for the day. They gave him their permission immediately.

We set out the next morning.

I love to ride in electric trains.

First of all, there's the gleaming chrome. Secondly, the red emergency brake lever stares you right in the face. No matter how long the trip is, I always feel like pulling it, or at least touching it. But the best part is the ledge under the window. If somebody isn't tall enough to look out he can stand on it and stick his head out anyway. Misha and I got a window to ourselves. It was fun looking out at the brand-new grass and at wash hanging on lines like colored signal flags on a ship.

Mommy and Daddy kept nagging us to death. They kept yanking at our belts, pulling us away from the window and scolding,

"Stop sticking your heads out! You'll fall out!"

We couldn't stop, though. Then Daddy decided to trick us. He was going to get

us away from the window, no matter what. That's why he made a funny face and spoke in a funny voice, just like a clown.

"Hurry up, boys! Take your seats! The show's about to begin!" Misha and I fell away from the window in a flash. We plopped down on the seat side by side, because my daddy's a great one for joking, and we knew there was real fun ahead. All the other passengers turned to look at him, too, but that didn't bother Daddy one bit. He went right on.

"Ladies and gentlemen! May I introduce that great magician, the world-famous master of sleight-of-hand, that darling of Australian and the Moscow suburbs, that swallower of swords, tin cans and old light-bulbs, Professor Edward Kondratyevich Kio-Sio! A flourish from the orchestra, please! Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay, ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!"

By now everyone was looking at Daddy. He stood up, facing Misha and me. "This number will be presented at the risk of my life! Watch closely now. I am going to detach my index finger from the rest of my hand in a bloodless operation. The weak-hearted will please refrain from fainting and will leave the premises. "Attention, please!"

At this Daddy put his hands together so that it seemed his right hand was clutching his left thumb. He strained, got all red, made a terrible face, as if he was in great pain, and then suddenly looked angry. Then ... he pulled off his thumb! Believe it or not! We saw him do it. And there wasn't a drop of blood on him. His thumb was gone! There wasn't even a stump left. Honest!

"Voila!" Daddy said.

I don't know what the word means, but I clapped anyway and Misha yelled Bravo! Then Daddy waved both hands, put one hand under his collar and said,

"Alley-oop! Chickie-brickie!" And he stuck his finger back on again! He did! There was a new finger instead of the missing one, and it looked just like the old one. Even the ink smudge was in the same place. I knew it was a trick, and I was going to make Daddy tell me how he'd done it, but just then Misha said, "How'd you do it?" in a puzzled voice.

Daddy smiled mysteriously and said, "I don't want you to get old before your time from knowing too much."



"Please do it again. Do the chickie-brickie thing again!" Misha begged.

So Daddy did the trick again. He pulled his finger off his hand and then stuck it back on again, amazing everyone again. Then Daddy bowed and we decided the show was over. But it wasn't.

"In view of the many requests from the audience, the show will go on. You will now see a real coin being rubbed into the magician's elbow. Maestro, ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!"

Daddy took a coin from his pocket, raised his arm, placed the coin on his elbow and began rubbing it on his sleeve. Nothing happened. The coin kept falling off.

"Humph! You're no magician! You've forgotten all your tricks," I said.

Everybody laughed. Daddy got all red in the face.

"Hey, you! Coin! Get rubbed into my sleeve this minute! If you don't I'll give you to the ice cream man over there and you'll be sorry!" he said. This seemed to scare the coin, because it got rubbed right into his sleeve and disappeared.

"How's that, Dennis? Who said I wasn't much of a magician? Now watch

carefully or you won't believe your eyes. I'll now produce the coin from this fine fellow Misha's ear. Chickie-brickie!" And he plucked the coin from Misha's ear.

I never dreamed my Daddy could do such tricks. Misha beamed. He was proud the coin had come out of his ear. He shouted,

"Please do the chickie-brickie thing again!"

So Daddy did it again. Then Mommy said,

"Intermission, everybody! Time for refreshments." She gave us each a salami sandwich. We sank our teeth into them and swang our feet. Then Misha said to Mommy,

"I know what your hat looks like."

"What does it look like?" Mommy asked.

"Like a cosmonaut's helmet."

"It does. You have an eye for detail, Misha," Daddy said. "That's exactly what it looks like. Well, that's women's styles for you. They always want to keep up with the times. Come over here, Misha." Daddy took Mommy's new hat and clapped it onto Misha's head.

"He looks just like a cosmonaut," Mommy said.

And he really did look like a midget cosmonaut. Misha got so puffed up that everyone who passed him smiled.

Daddy and Mommy and I smiled, too. Then Daddy bought us ice cream pops and we began licking them. Misha finished his first and went back to the window. He held on to the window frame, stepped on the ledge and stuck his head out.

The train was speeding along. Nature flashed by the window. Misha liked his helmet so much he was beaming. I wanted to get up on the ledge beside him, but Mommy nudged me and pointed to Daddy with a glance.

Daddy had gotten up from his seat and was tiptoeing over to the next row of

seats. The window was open there too, but no one was standing by it. Daddy looked so strange that the other passengers stopped talking. They were all waiting to see what he'd do next. He crept over to the window, stuck his head out and looked off towards the head of the train like Misha was doing. Then, very slowly, he stuck his arm through the window till it was just at the back of Misha's head. He snatched Mommy's hat off Misha. Then Daddy sprang away from the window and stuffed the hat up the back of his jacket. I'd seen him do it, but Misha hadn't. Misha grabbed for his head, couldn't find Mommy's hat, spun around and looked at her. He really was scared.

"What's the matter, Misha? Where's my new hat? Did the wind blow it off? Didn't you hear me tell you not to stick your head out of the window? I just knew you'd lose it! Oh, dear, what'll I do?" Mommy buried her face in her hands and her shoulders shook as if she were sobbing.

Poor Misha! He looked like he was going to cry. "Please don't cry. I'll buy you a new hat. I've some money. I've got 47 kopecks. I was saving up for trading stamps," he spluttered and his chin trembled.

Daddy never thought it would be this bad. He made a funny face and shouted in his clown's voice, "Attention, please! Dry your tears! You're a lucky boy, because you know the famous magician Edward Kondratyevich Kio-Sio. You will now witness a most amazing trick. It's called: The Return of the Hat That Disappeared Out of the Window of the Blue Express.' On your mark! Get ready! Chickie-brickie!" and there was Mommy's hat in his hand!

I'd been watching closely, but even so I missed the moment he'd snatched it out from under his jacket. Everyone gasped. Misha's eyes seemed ready to pop out of his head he was so surprised. He went over to Daddy, took the hat, ran back to the open window and tossed it way out. Then he turned back to Daddy and said,

"Now do the chickie-brickie thing again, please."

That's when I nearly died laughing.

PROFESSOR FULL-OF-BEANS

Daddy gets annoyed if I interrupt him when he's reading the paper, but I keep forgetting, because I want to talk to him. After all, he's the only Daddy I have, and that's why I always want to talk to him.

Once, when he was reading the paper and Mommy was mending my jacket, I said,

"D'you know how many times the Sea of Azov can fit into Lake Baikal, Daddy?"

"Don't bother me."

"Ninety-two times! How's that?"

"Fine. Now be quiet." And he went on reading.

"Did you ever hear of an artist named El Greco?"

He nodded.

"His real name was Domenikos Theotokopoulos. He was from the Island of Crete. And Crete once belonged to the Greeks. So that's why the Spaniards called him El Greco. That's really something. And you know, a whale's range of hearing is five kilometers!"

"Just be still for a few minutes. Just for five minutes."

But I was bursting from all the new information I had. I couldn't possibly keep still. Maybe if there hadn't been so much of it I might have, but there was and I couldn't.

"Listen to this, Daddy! There are tiny buffaloes in the Sunda Islands. They're like midgets. You can even bring one home in a suitcase!"

"You don't say? Indeed. Now will you please let me read in peace?"

"Go right ahead. You know, Daddy, we could keep a whole herd of those

buffaloes in the hall. And you know, Yuri Gagarin was given the key to Cairo! How's that?"

"Wonderful. Now will you be still?"

"And the sun's not in the middle of the sky, but off to a side."

"You don't say?"

"Pon my word. It really is. Stuck into the sky and off to a side."

Daddy looked at me. His eyes were glazed. Then they got into focus again and he said to Mommy, "Where'd he get all this? And when'd he manage to?"

Mommy smiled. "He's a modern child. He reads, listens to the radio and watches TV. What did you expect?"

"Amazing. At his age." At which he disappeared behind his paper again.

"What's that you're reading that's so interesting?" Mommy asked.

"It's about Africa. It's in state of turmoil. This is the end of colonialism."

"No, it isn't," I said.

"What?"

I crawled under the paper and stood up between him and it. "There are still a lot of dependent countries. An awful lot."

"You're no child. You're a great professor. Professor Full-of-Beans," Daddy said and smiled at me.

Mommy laughed. Then she said, "All right, Dennis, that's enough. Go outside and play." She handed me my jacket and gave me a little shove. "Go on."



As we went out into the hall I said. "What's professor-full-of-beans, Mommy? I never heard anyone say that before. Was Daddy making fun of me? Was he?"

"Not at all. Daddy'd never make fun of you. On the contrary, he was praising you."

I felt much better and went out to play, but on the way downstairs I remembered I'd wanted to visit Lena, because everyone said she was sick and had stopped eating. So I went to see her. There was a stranger there. He had on a dark suit and his hands were very white. He and Lena's mother were sitting at the table, talking. Lena was lying in bed, glueing on a toy horse's leg. She shouted when she saw me. "Dennis is here! Hooray!"

"Hello," I said politely. "Don't shout like a ninny!" I sat down at the foot of her bed.

The strange man stood up and said, "I hope everything's clear. She needs plenty of fresh air. She's not a sick girl at all. There's nothing to worry about."

That meant he was a doctor.

"Thank you, Professor. Thank you so much," her mother said and shook his hand. He must have been a very good doctor and must have known a lot. That's why she called him "professor".

He went over to Lena and said, "Goodbye, Lena. I want to see you up and about."

She got all flustered, stuck her tongue out at me, turned away to the wall and whispered, "Goodbye."

The doctor patted her head and then said to me, "And what is your name, young man?"

Wasn't that nice? He'd called me a young man. I stood right up and said, "Dennis Korablyov. And what's yours?"

He took my hand in his large, soft, white hand. I was surprised it was so soft. It felt so smooth. And he smelled so good and clean. He shook my hand and said,

"I'm Professor Sergeyev."

"You mean you're full of beans? Professor-full-of-beans?"

Lena's mother clutched her head. The professor blinked and cleared his throat. They both left the room.

I had a feeling there was something funny about the way they'd both gone out of the room. It was as if they'd run out. I also had a feeling I'd said something wrong.

Maybe "professor-full-of-beans" isn't a nice thing to say to a person after all.

3rd PLACE, BUTTERFLY STROKE

I was feeling fine as I walked home from the swimming pool. Everything seemed great: the trolleybuses, because they were transparent and you could see who was riding in them through the windows, the ladies who were selling ice cream, because they looked so happy, and the day that wasn't too hot, and breezes that cooled my wet head.

But best of all, that day I'd taken third place in the butterfly stroke and I was going to tell Daddy all about it. He'd always wanted me to learn to swim. He says everybody should know how to swim, and especially boys, because they're men, and you can't really call a man a man if he goes and drowns in the sea during a shipwreck, or in a pond if a rowboat turns over.

So today I took third place and was going to tell Daddy all about it. I hurried home as fast as I could.

"What're you so happy about?" Mommy said as she let me in.

"We had a swimming race today."

"What kind of a race?"

"A twenty-five-meter race doing the butterfly stroke."

"How'd you make out?"

"I took third place!"

Daddy smiled. "You don't say? Good for you! Isn't that something!"

I'd known he'd be real happy. Looking at him now, I felt still better than before.

"Who took first place?"

"Vova. He's been swimming a long time, so it was a cinch."

"Good for Vova! And who took second place?"

"A red-headed boy. I don't know his name. He looks like a frog, especially when he's in the water."

"And you took third." Daddy smiled again. I was feeling great.

"Well, third place isn't bad, either. Third, place gets the bronze medal. Who took fourth?"

"Nobody."

"What d'you mean?"

"We all took third place: me and Misha, and Tolya, and Kim, and everybody. Vova took first place, the red-headed froggy boy took second, and all the rest of us eighteen kids took third. The swimming coach said so."

"Oh. So that's it. I see." And he went back to his paper.

Somehow, I didn't feel as good as I had up till then.



WE'RE AS GOOD AS CIRCUS PEOPLE

I've been going to the circus a lot lately. I have friends there now, and they let me in for free whenever I want to go. That's because I'm practically a circus performer myself. It all happened on account of a boy.

I was on my way home from the store a while ago. We've moved to a new apartment that's near the circus and there's a big food store on the corner. Anyway, I was on my way home from the store, carrying a bag of tomatoes and a small container of sour cream. That's when I saw Aunt Dusya. She'd been our neighbor in our old house. She's a very kind lady. Last year she gave Misha and me tickets to a children's play. I was very glad to see her, and she was very glad to see me.

"Where are you going, Dennis?"

"Home. I just bought some tomatoes. Hello, Aunt Dusya!"

She was amazed. "You mean you go shopping all by yourself now? How time flies!"

What was there to be so surprised about? Wasn't it natural for me to be growing up? Anyway, I said goodbye and started off, but she shouted after me,

"Wait! Stop! Would you like to go to a matinee at the circus?"

What a question! How could she even ask?

"Sure I do!"

She took my hand and we climbed the steps to the entrance. Aunt Dusya went over to the usher and said,

"This is a dear old friend of mine, Maria. Do you mind if he watches the performance?"

The lady smiled and let me in. The two of them followed me. I walked down the dark outside corridor thinking of the beautiful smell of a circus. It's a very special kind of smell. The minute it hit me it made me scared and excited. I

could hear the music and was in a hurry to get where it was. We finally reached a side entrance. Somebody gave me a little shove. Then the lady named Maria whispered,

"Go sit over there. See the empty seat in the first row?" I went straight to the seat and sat down next to a boy my age. He had on his school uniform, too. He glared at me, because I was late and was distracting him, and so on, but I didn't pay any attention to him.

I looked straight at the performer in the middle of the ring. He had on a huge turban and was holding a giant needle threaded with a long, narrow ribbon. There was a lady on either side of him. The ladies were just standing there. All of a sudden the man turned to one of them and-wow!-he stuck the needle right through her middle, and it came out of her back! I thought she'd begin to scream, but she just stood there, smiling. It just couldn't be happening. Then he turned to the other one and sewed right through her, too! But she didn't scream, either. She just stood there, smiling, too. I stared at them. They were attached to each other by the ribbon that was threaded through them, and they were both smiling as if they didn't mind it a bit. Imagine!

"How can they just stand there? They didn't even scream!"

"Why should they? It doesn't hurt," the boy sitting next to me said.

"I'd like to see you have a ribbon pulled through you. You'd sure yell your head off!"

He laughed. You'd think he was years older than me. Then he said, "I thought you were a circus boy, because Aunt Maria brought you in. But you're not. You're not one of us."

"What difference does it make whether I'm circus boy or not? What's so special about circus boys? They're just the same as everybody else."

"They are not. Circus people are different."

"Do they have three legs or something?"

"No, but they're quicker than other people and stronger, and smarter."

This made me mad. "Don't be so stuck up! You think other people are worse than you? Are you a circus boy?"

He looked down and said, "No, I'm Mama's little darling." And he smiled a real sneaky smile, but I didn't understand what it was all about, then. Now I know that he was teasing me, but then I laughed out loud at him.

"Watch the performance! Next is the bareback rider," he said.

The band began to play louder and faster. A white horse trotted into the ring. It was as big as a couch. There was a lady standing on its flat back. She began hopping up and down, first on one foot with her arms straight out and then on both feet, as if she were jumping rope. It looked easy as pie, what with the horse being so flat-backed. It was probably like jumping up and down on a desk. I was sure I could do it.

The lady kept on jumping up and down, while a man in a black suit who was the ringmaster, kept cracking a whip to make the horse go faster, and the horse clumped along: clump, clump. The ringmaster shouted at the horse and kept cracking his whip, but the horse didn't pay any attention to him. What a bore. The lady finally got tired of jumping up and down and trotted off behind the curtain, but the horse kept on walking around the ring anyway.

Just then Karandash, the famous clown, entered the ring. The boy sitting next to me looked at me quickly, then looked away and said in a sort of off-handed way, "Ever see this act before?"

"No."

"Let's change seats. You'll have a better view from here. Come on, I've seen it before." He smiled. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing yet. Wait'll you see what Karandash is going to do. You'll die laughing. Come on, let's change."

If he was being so big-hearted, there was no reason why we couldn't. So we changed seats. His really was a better seat.

Karandash went into his act. "Can I ride this horsie?" he asked the ringmaster.

"Of course. Go right ahead."

Karandash tried to climb onto the horse's back. He was huffing and puffing, but his legs were too short, so he kept falling off, because the horse really was very big and fat. Finally, he said, "Give me a hand up, will you?"

An assistant came over and bent down. Karandash climbed up onto the man's back and from there onto the horse, but he had got on front to back. He was facing the horse's tail. Everybody laughed.

"You're on backwards," the ringmaster said.

"How d'you know? You don't know which way I want to go."

Then the ringmaster patted the horse's neck and said, "Its head is over here."

Karandash got hold of the horse's tail and said, "But its beard is over here!"

Then the assistant attached a rope to Karandash's belt. The other end was strung through a ring high up under the big top. The ringmaster was holding the loose end. He shouted, alley-oop! The band began to play, and the horse set off at a trot. Karandash began jiggling up and down, sliding off one side and then off the other. All of a sudden the horse began moving away from under him and he hollered, "Help! The horse is ending!"

Soon it was trotting along behind. Karandash would've probably fallen, but just then the ringmaster pulled in the rope and Karandash dangled in the air. I could hardly breathe from laughing so hard. I turned to the boy in the next seat. He was gone. Meanwhile, Karandash was moving his arms like he was swimming. The ringmaster lowered him, but the minute he touched ground and took a few running steps he was jerked into the air again. It was like a swing, and everyone was laughing.

He kept on flying, up and down, up and down and nearly lost his pants. Then, when he touched ground the next time, he looked at me and winked. He really did! I winked right back. What was so special about that? And why shouldn't I have? Here was this funny clown winking at me.



Then he winked at me again, rubbed his hands, got a running start, headed straight for me, grabbed hold of me, and the ringmaster yanked his end of the rope hard. Karandash and I both flew up into the air. Together! He had my head locked under his arm in a steel grip. His other arm was around my middle, clutching me tightly, because by then it was a long way down to the arena floor. I couldn't see the audience below, nothing but black and white stripes, because we were circling so fast. I had a funny tickling feeling in my throat. As we were flying over the band I was sure we'd crash into the big tuba and screamed, "Mommy!"

I heard a roar. It was everybody laughing. Karandash mimicked me.

"Oh, Mommy!" he piped in a happy voice.

There was crashing and thunder below, but we just kept on flying. I was finally getting used to it when all of a sudden my paper bag burst and my tomatoes began dropping like bombs. A whole kilo of tomatoes! They were probably hitting people in the audience, because the noise they were making was like nothing before. I kept thinking that if the container of sour cream, 300 grams of it, dropped out also, Mommy would never let me hear the end of it. Just then Karandash began spinning like a top, and me along with him, but he never should've done it, because I got scared again and began kicking and scratching.

"What's the matter, Tolya?" Karandash said very softly, but his voice was stern.

"I'm not Tolya! I'm Dennis! Leggo!"

I tried to break away, but he clutched me so hard he nearly choked me. We began slowing down. I could see everything clearly below now, the people and the

ringmaster who was looking up at us and smiling. Just then the sour cream slipped out of my torn bag. I could've known it. It landed on the ringmaster's head. He yelped and we landed with a bang.

The minute we touched ground Karandash let go of me. I made a dash for it, but I didn't know which way to run, so I spun around, because I was still feeling dizzy. Then I spotted Aunt Dusya and her friend the usher in an aisle. They were as pale as ghosts. I ran towards them. Everyone was clapping.

"Are you all right? Let's go home," Aunt Dusya said.

"What about the tomatoes?"

"I'll get you some."

She took my hand and led me out to the dim foyer. We saw a boy leaning against the wall there. It was the boy who had been sitting next to me.

"Where were you, Tolya?" the usher asked.

He didn't say anything.

"Where'd you disappear to?" I asked. "The minute we changed seats all kinds of things started happening! Karandash dragged me straight up to the ceiling!"

"Why'd you take his seat?" the usher asked me.

"He said, 'Let's change seats.' He said I'd have a better view from his seat. So we changed. And then he disappeared."

"I see. I'm going to tell the director, Tolya, and he'll give your part to someone else."

"Don't! Please don't!" he begged.

Then she shouted at him in a whisper, "Shame on you! You're a circus boy. You've rehearsed. How could you've put an outside boy in your seat? What if he'd fallen and gotten killed? He hasn't been in training like you!"

"That's all right," I said. "I'm trained enough. As good as circus people. Didn't I

fly good?"

"You were great! Take my word for it," Tolya said. "And that stunt with tomatoes flying out of a bag was terrific. I'd never thought of it."

"That clown has no sense! Grabbing anyone he can lay his hands on!" Aunt Dusya raged.

"Karandash was in the middle of his act," the usher replied. "He was up in the air. He's no mind-reader. He knew that was a special seat and that the boy in it was a circus boy. They've done it so many times. But you two boys are like peas in a pod. Even your clothes are the same. So he didn't notice the difference."

"I should say he didn't! He snatched Dennis up like a hawk'll snatch a chick," Aunt Dusya said.

"Well? Are we going home?" I asked.

"Listen, come back around two o'clock on Sunday," Tolya said to me. "I'll be waiting for you by the box office."

"All right. I might as well."

THE DEATH OF SPITBALL THE SPY

It had gotten warm outside while I was busy being sick and spring vacation was just two days away. The first day I came back to school all the kids yelled,

"Hooray! Dennis is back!"

I was glad to be back in class with all the kids again. Katya, Misha and Valera were in their old seats. The potted plants on the windowsills were where they always are, and the blackboard was just as shiny, and our teacher, Raisa Ivanovna, was just as cheerful, and nothing had changed at all. During recess we all walked up and down the hall and laughed a lot. Misha suddenly looked very important and said,

"We're going to have a spring recital."

"We are?"

"Yes! We're going to perform in the assembly hall. And the fourth grade is putting on a play they wrote themselves. It's very interesting."

"Will you do anything, Misha?"

"Wait and see."

I couldn't wait for the day of the recital. I told Mommy all about it.

"I want to do something, too," I said. Mommy smiled.

"What can you do?"

"You know I can sing real loud, can't I? Even if I do have a 'C' in singing."

Mommy opened the wardrobe and spoke from someplace among her dresses, "You can sing some other time. You were sick for so long. You'll be part of the audience this time." She got out of the wardrobe. "Being in the audience is very nice, because you can sit back and watch the performance. Next time you'll be onstage, and the children who are taking part this time will be in the audience. Understand?"

"All right."

The next day I went to the recital. My parents were both working, so I went alone.

Boris Sergeyevich was at the piano. We all took seats up front, and all the grandmothers sat in back. The curtain hadn't gone up yet, so I began eating my apple.

Then the curtain parted and our Young Pioneer leader Lucy appeared. She said in a voice just like a radio announcer's:

"Welcome to our spring recital! Misha Slonov, a first-grade pupil, will recite a poem he wrote himself. Let's give him a hand!"

Everybody clapped and Misha came out. He went straight to the middle of the stage and stopped. He just stood there for a few seconds and then clasped his hands behind him and then stood there like that for a while. Then he put his left foot forward. Everyone was watching him. It was very quiet. Then he put his left foot back in place again and put his right foot forward. Then he began to clear his throat.

"Ahem! Ahem! Ahem!"

"You choke on something, Misha?" I asked.

He glared at me like he'd never seen me before. Then he looked up at the ceiling and said, "A poem.

The years will pass and we'll get old,
We'll be all full of wrinkles.
Good luck to all!
Study well, one and all!

The end." He bowed and came down off the stage. Everybody clapped real hard, because, in the first place, it was a great poem and, in the second place, just think: Misha'd made it up all by himself! That was really something.

Then Lucy came out to announce the next performer. "Valery Tagilov from 1B will now play for us."

Everyone clapped again, still harder than before. Lucy set a chair in the middle of the stage. Then Valery, who's in my class, came onstage, carrying his small accordion. He sat down and put the accordion case under his feet so's they wouldn't dangle.

Then he began to play "The Amur Waves". Everybody listened. I did, too. I kept wondering how he could make his fingers go so fast. I tried to make mine go as fast in the air, but I couldn't. Valery's grandmother had stood up by the wall off to a side when he came on. She was sort of conducting while he played. He played very well and very loudly. I liked it. Suddenly, he got stuck. His fingers stopped moving. He got a little red in the face, but began moving them again, as if he was warming them up. His fingers got as far as a certain spot and then stopped again. You'd think they'd stumbled over something. Then Valery got real red. He started warming up his fingers again, but they looked sort of scared. They probably knew they were going to get stuck again. Just as I was getting pretty bored with it all he reached the place where he'd gotten stuck twice before. This time, though, his grandmother suddenly stretched out her neck, leaned towards the stage and sang:

"The silvery waves, the silvery waves..."

Valery took his cue. His fingers seemed to have jumped over high step. They ran on and on, as fast as could be, right up to the very end of the piece. The applause was really something to remember. His grandmother even shouted: "Bravo!"

Then six girls from 1A and six boys from 1B ran onto the stage. The girls had colored ribbons in their hair, but the boys didn't have on anything special. They were dancing a fast Ukrainian dance and raising a cloud of dust that made me sneeze. After a while Boris Sergeyevich banged hard on the keys and stopped playing.

The boys and girls still went on dancing a while without the music, each doing whatever step he felt like, which made things look exciting. I was going to get up on the stage and join them, but they ran off. Lucy came out again and said,



"There'll be a fifteen-minute intermission, after which the fourth grade will present a play they wrote themselves. It's called 'The Death of Spitball the Spy'."

Chairs began scraping as the audience rose and left. I got my apple out of my pocket and went on eating it.

Lucy was standing nearby, so that when a tall, red-headed girl came running over to her I heard her say,

"What'll we do, Lucy? Yegorov hasn't shown up!"

"What? Who'll ring and shoot then?"

"We've got to find someone else. Right now. Someone with brains. So's we can explain in a hurry what he's supposed to do."

Lucy looked around and noticed me eating my apple. She broke out in a big smile. "Here's Dennis! Just the boy we're looking for. Come over here, Dennis!"

When I went over to them the red-headed girl stared at me and said, "Is he really smart?"

"I think so."

"You'd never say he was."

"Don't worry. I'm real smart," I said.

They both laughed at this, and the red-headed girl led me backstage.

A fourth-grade boy was there. He had on a black suit and his hair had been powdered with chalk dust to make him gray-haired. He was holding a pistol. The boy next to him was pasted on to a fake beard. He had on a pair of blue glasses. He was wearing a plaid raincoat with the collar turned up. Some of the other fourth-graders were holding things. One had a briefcase. A girl in a housecoat and kerchief was holding a broom.

The minute I saw the pistol the boy in the black suit had I said, "Is it real?"

But the red-headed girl interrupted me. "Now, listen closely, Dennis. You're

going to stand here in the wings and watch the action. When this boy says, 'You'll never worm this out of me, Spit-ball!' You ring the bell. Understand?" And she handed me a bicycle bell. "You ring this. It's supposed to be a telephone ringing. Then he'll pick up the receiver, talk into the phone and exit. You just stand here and don't say anything. Understand?"

"Sure, that's easy. Now tell me about the gun. Is it real? What make is it?"

"Oh, for goodness sake! Of course it isn't! That's what you're for. You're going to do the shooting. Right here, in the wings. When the boy with the beard is left all alone onstage he'll snatch this folder from the desk and rush to the window. Then this boy will aim the gun at him. That's your cue. You take this little board and slam it as hard as you can against the wooden seat of this chair."

She showed me how to do it. It was great. It really did sound like a gun going off.

"Wow! Then what?"

"That's all. Now you repeat what I said, so I'll know you've got it straight."

I repeated everything she'd said.

"All right. Don't let us down!"

"I won't."

Then the school bell rang.

I put the bicycle bell on the radiator, leaned the board against the chair and peeped out at the audience through a crack in the curtain. I saw Raisa Ivanovna and Lucy taking their seats, and a lot of the other kids, too. I saw the grandmothers filing in. Then somebody's father stood up on a chair in the back row. He had a camera and trained it on the stage. It was much more interesting to be standing on the stage, looking out at them than to be sitting in the audience, looking at the stage.

The noise was dying down. Then the girl who'd brought me backstage ran into the wings and pulled a cord. The curtain parted. She jumped down off the stage.

The boy in the black suit was seated at a desk in the middle of the stage. I knew he had a gun in his pocket. The boy with the fake beard was pacing up and down. He was saying that he'd lived abroad for many years and had now returned. Then he started nagging the boy in the black suit, begging him to show him the plans of the airfield.

The boy in the black suit said, "You'll never worm this out of me, Spitball!"

This was my cue to ring the bell. I put my hand out for it, but the bell wasn't on the radiator. I decided it must have fallen to the floor and bent down to look, but it wasn't there, either. My heart froze. Then I looked at the stage. Nobody was saying anything. At last, the boy in the black suit frowned and repeated,

"No! You'll never worm that out of me, Spitball!"

I was frantic. Where was the bell? It had been there a minute ago. It couldn't have run off by itself. Maybe it was wedged behind the radiator? I crouched down and felt around in the dust there. No luck. What was I to do?

Meanwhile, the bearded boy began wringing his hands and shouting, "This is the fifth time I'm asking you to show me the plans of the airfield!"

Then the boy in the black suit turned to me and shouted, "You'll never worm this out of me, Spitball!" And he shook his fist at me. So did the bearded boy.

I was sure they'd kill me when it was all over. The bell was gone. It had disappeared. Vanished!

Then the boy in the black suit clutched his head. He looked at me. "The telephone'll probably ring now. You'll see. It'll ring now. Right now!" he said like he was about to burst out crying.

I had a brainstorm. I stuck my head out of the wings so that everyone in the audience could see me and said, "Ring! Ring!"

Everybody burst out laughing. The boy in the black suit heaved a sigh of relief. He snatched up the receiver and yelled, "Hello!" Then he mopped his forehead.

Everything went smoothly after that. The boy in the black suit stood up and said to the bearded boy, "I've got to leave for a few minutes, but I'll be right back."

He went off into the wings opposite and stood there. Then the bearded boy tiptoed over to the desk and began rummaging in it. He kept glancing over his shoulder every few seconds. Then he laughed a sneering laugh, snatched a folder from the drawer and ran to the cardboard window pasted on the wall at the back of the stage. Then the boy in the black suit ran onstage and aimed his gun at him. I grabbed the board and slammed it down hard on the seat of the chair.

I hadn't noticed the cat that had climbed onto the chair. It yowled, because I'd mashed its tail. There was no sound of a shot. The cat streaked onstage, where the boy in the black suit had lunged at the bearded boy and begun choking him. The cat was trying to escape. While they were wrestling the bearded boy's beard got unstuck and fell off. The cat probably thought it was a mouse. It snatched it up and ran off. When the boy saw he'd lost his beard he stretched out on the floor as if he was dead. The audience roared. Then all the other fourth-grade kids came running onstage. Some were carrying their briefcases. The girl in the housecoat was carrying a broom. They all began shouting.

"What was that shooting?"

"Who was shooting?"

Actually, there hadn't been any shooting, because the cat had ruined everything. But the boy in the black suit said, "I killed Spitball the Spy!"

Then the red-headed girl pulled the cord and the curtain fell. The audience was clapping so hard it hurt my ears. I ran down to the cloakroom, put on my coat and ran home.

Something was knocking against my leg as I ran. I stopped, stuck my hand into my pocket and pulled out the bicycle bell.

PUSS-IN-BOOTS

"Girls and boys," Raisa Ivanovna said, "I'm very pleased with the way you've ended this term. Now you can really relax after your studies. During your vacation there's going to be a masquerade party at school. There'll be a prize for the best costume, so start thinking." She picked up our notebooks, said goodbye and left the classroom.

On our way home Misha said, "I'm going to be an elf. Mommy bought me a hooded raincape yesterday. So I'll just have to change my face and I'll be set. What're you going to be?"

"I don't know."

I soon forgot all about the masquerade party because when I got home Mommy said she was going on a field trip for ten days and that I was to behave and take care of Daddy. She left the next morning. I certainly had my hands full, taking care of Daddy. Besides, it was snowing and I kept wondering when Mommy'd be back, crossing off the days on my calendar.

One day Misha showed up and yelled when he saw me,

"Aren't you going?"

"Where?"

"Where? To school! This is the day of the masquerade party! Everybody'll be in costume. Can't you see I have my costume on?"

Then I noticed that he was wearing his hooded raincape.

"I don't have a costume. Mommy isn't back yet."

"We can think of something ourselves. D'you have anything that looks funny? You can put it on, and that'll be your costume."

"Not really. Except for Daddy's wading boots, the ones he wears when he goes fishing."

Those rubber boots were really something. You'd never get your feet wet if you had them on when you had to tramp through water or mud.

"Go on, put them on and we'll have a look at you," Misha said.

I stuck my feet, shoes and all, into Daddy's boots. They practically reached up to my armpits. I tried walking in them. It was rather clumsy, but I could manage. Anyway, they had a fierce shine and Misha liked them.

"What about a hat?" he asked.

"How about Mommy's straw hat?"

"Let's have it!"

I found it and put it on. It was a little big on me and kept slipping down over my face, but the flowers on it were nice.

Misha looked at me and said, "It's neat, but I don't know what to call it."

"How about Mushroom?"

"No, not with a hat with flowers on it. Maybe you'll be an old fisherman."

"Humph! How can I be an old fisherman if I don't have a beard?"

Misha was thinking hard. The doorbell rang. It was our neighbor, Vera Sergeyevna. The minute she saw me she gasped and said,

"Oh! You're a real Puss-in-Boots!"

That was it! I'd be Puss-in-Boots. But I didn't have a tail.

"How can I be a cat if I don't have a tail? I need a tail. D'you have anything I could use for a tail, Vera Sergeyevna?" I said.

"Wait a minute. I think I do." She was soon back with a raggedy-looking reddish tail with black spots on it. "Here," she said. "This is the tail of an old fur piece. I use it as a duster, but I think it's what you want."

I thanked her.

"Give me a needle and thread, Dennis. Hurry up. I'll sew it on. It's a terrific tail," Misha said. He started sewing it on, and was doing it real fast and then he stuck me.

"Ow! Can't you see you're sewing me? That hurts!"

"I'm sorry," he said and stuck me again.

"If you don't watch out I'll crack you one!"

"I never sewed anything before," he said and stuck me again.

I really yelled. "What's the matter? D'you want to cripple me for life?"

"Wait! That's all. It's done! Boy, what a tail! A lot of real cats'll envy you."

Then I dipped a brush into a bottle of India ink and drew long black whiskers across my cheeks.

Then we set out for school.

The place was jam-packed. Everybody was in costume. There must've been about fifty elves. There were also a lot of snow-flakes. That's a costume made of a lot of white gauze with a girl inside.



We all had a wonderful time making noise and dancing.

I danced, too, but I kept tripping over my big boots and my hat kept slipping down over my face.

Then Lucy got up on the stage and said, "Will Puss-in-Boots please come up onto the stage? He's been awarded First Prize for the best costume!"

I clumped up the stairs to the stage and stumbled over the last one and nearly fell. Lucy shook my hand and handed me two books: "Uncle Steeple" and "Rhymes and Riddles". Then Boris Sergeyevich played a flourish and I clumped back down again and tripped and nearly fell again, and everybody laughed.

On the way home Misha said, "There were a lot of elves, but you were the only Puss-in-Boots."

"I know, but all the other elves weren't any good. You were the only funny one. You should've gotten a book, too. Here, take one."

"No, I don't want it."

"Go on, take one. Which d'you want?"

"Uncle Steeple".

So I gave him "Uncle Steeple".

When I got home I pulled off Daddy's big wading boots and ran over to the calendar and ticked off today. Then, while I was at it, I ticked off tomorrow. That leaves only three days till Mommy'll be back.

EXACTLY 25 KILOS

Misha and I were going to a children's party at the community center around the corner. Mommy said we were to behave ourselves and gave each of us fifteen kopecks. When we got there there was a great crush in the cloakroom. We stood at the end of a line that was hardly moving. Suddenly we heard music. It was coming from upstairs. We were in a terrible rush to get our coats checked. A lot of the other kids were just as nervous when the music started, and some of the littlest ones began to cry. They were afraid they'd miss all the fun.

We finally ran up the steps, two at a time. It was really beautiful there. There were paper streamers strung under the ceiling from wall to wall, and paper festoons. There were colored lanterns. A band was playing and actors in costume, with one blowing a bugle and another playing a drum, were right in with the crowd. Someone was dressed as a jester. There were crooked mirrors, and the door at the back of the hall had a sign on it that said:

"Amusements".

"What's that?" I wondered.

"It's a kind of fun room," Misha said.

He was right. There was an apple hanging on a string and you had to keep your hands in back of you and try to bite it, but each time your mouth touched it it would spin away, so that you never could, which wasn't fair at all. I steadied it with my hand twice and took two bites out of it, but everybody laughed and wouldn't let me play any more. Then there was a bow and rubber-tipped arrows. Anyone who hit the bull's eye won a prize.

Misha tried first. He kept aiming and aiming, and when he finally let go of the bowstring he missed the target altogether.

"Huh! Some shot!" I said.

"That's because it's my first arrow. If they'd give me five I could practice, but they only gave me one. You can't hit it that way."

"Come on, it's my turn! Watch me hit the bull's eye."

The man who was in charge of the bows and arrows said, "All right, let's see what a good shot you are." He went to fix the target, because it was hanging crookedly. I was all set to shoot my arrow and was only waiting for him to move. The bowstring was drawn very taut. I kept saying to myself, "I'm going to hit the bull's eye."

Then, all of a sudden, the arrow slipped out of my hand. Swish! It hit the man smack in the rear end.

He spun around and snapped, "Put down the bow! You're not shooting any more."

"It was an accident!" I said, but left anyway.

This wasn't our lucky day. Then we saw the beam scale and there was a line of kids. They were moving up quickly, and everyone was shouting and laughing. A clown was in charge of things.

"What's all this about?" I asked.

"Get in line to be weighed. If you weigh exactly 25 kilos you'll win a year's subscription to Murzilka."

"Come on, let's get in line," I said to Misha, but he'd disappeared. I decided to get in line anyway. What if I weighed exactly 25 kilos? That would really be a stroke of luck!

The line kept moving up, and the clown kept sliding the scale weights back and forth, talking all the time.

"You've an extra kilo. Don't eat so much candy!" Click! went the weights. "And you, my dear young man, aren't a very good eater. You only weigh 19 kilos. Come back next year." Click! Click!

The line kept moving up, but nobody, not one single kid, weighed exactly 25 kilos. Finally, it was my turn. I got on the scale. The weights went click!, click! and the clown said,

"Oho! D'you know the game called 'Hot and Cold'?"

"Sure. Everybody does."

"You're hot. Very hot. You weigh $24\frac{1}{2}$ kilos. You only need half a kilo more to win. What a shame. Next, please!"

Only half a kilo! It was practically the same as weighing 25. The party was ruined as far as I was concerned. What an all around unlucky day! Just then Misha showed up.

"Where've you been, Your Highness?"

"Drinking soda."

"That's fine. Here I am, killing myself, trying to get us a subscription for Murzilka, while you're off having a good time." And I told him about what had just happened.

"I'm going to try now," Misha said.

When he stood up on the scale the clown slid the weights, smiled and said, "A little over the edge! It's $25\frac{1}{2}$ kilos. You'll have to lose half a kilo. Next, please!"

Misha got down and said to me, "I shouldn't have had that soda."

"What's it got to do with it?"

"I had a whole bottle. Understand?"

"No."

"Don't you know there's half a liter of soda in a bottle?" "Sure. So what?"

"So nothing. A half-liter of soda weighs half a kilo. If I hadn't had the soda, I'd've weighed exactly 25 kilos!"

"You would?"



"Yes, I would!"

I had a great idea. "You know what? We've won the subscription!"

"How come?"

"Now I'll have a bottle of soda, because I weigh 24 ¹/₂ kilos!"

"Come on! Run!" Misha led the way to the snack bar.

We bought a bottle of soda.

"Is there always exactly half a liter in every bottle?" Misha asked as the woman opened it.

"Of course," she replied.

I carried the bottle over to a table, sat down and began drinking. Misha stood over me, watching. The soda was very cold, but I gulped down a glassful anyway. Misha refilled my glass. That still left quite a bit in the bottle. I knew I didn't want any more.

"Come on! What're you waiting for?"

"It's ice-cold. I don't want to get a sore throat."

"Don't think about it and you won't. What's the matter? Are you chicken?"

"You are," I said and began sipping the second glass. I was having a hard time getting it down. After I had about half of it I realized I couldn't swallow another sip. "That's all, Misha. No more'll go in."

"Sure, it will. You just think it won't. Go on. Keep drinking." I tried and nearly gagged.

"What're you sprawled all over the table for? Stand up and more'll fit in!"

I stood up. He was right. I somehow managed to pour the rest of

the glass down my throat, but the minute I did Misha splashed whatever was left in the bottle into my empty glass. It was more than half full again.

"I'll burst."

"How come I didn't? I thought I would, too. Come on, you've got to do it."

"If. I burst. You'll. Be. Responsible. Misha."

"All right. Go on and drink it."

I started sipping again and finally drank it all. It was really a miracle. But I couldn't talk, because the soda filled all of my insides and all of my throat, with some of it in my mouth and some trickling out of my nose.

I made it back to the scale. The clown didn't recognize me. The weights went click!, click! and he suddenly shouted loud enough for everyone to hear,

"Hurry, everybody! Here he is! He weighs exactly 25 kilos! This boy has just won a year's subscription to Murzilka! I'll fill in the subscription blank right now. Let's give him a hand!"

He raised my left hand, everyone clapped and he imitated a flourish. He took out his pen and said, "Now, then. What's your name? First and last names, please."

But I said nothing. I was so full of soda I couldn't speak. So Misha said, "His name's Dennis. And his last name's Korablyov. Write it down. I know him."

The clown handed me the filled-in blank and said, "You might at least say 'thank you'."

I bobbed my head.

"He's saying 'thank you'. I know him," Misha said.

"What a boy!" the clown exclaimed. "He won a fine subscription and he won't even say a word. You'd think he had a mouth full of water or something!"

"Don't pay any attention to him. He's just shy. I know him,"

Misha said, grabbed my hand and dragged me downstairs.

Once out in the street I caught my breath at last. "You know, Misha, I feel funny about taking this sub. After all, I only weigh 24 ¹/₂ kilos."

"Then give it to me, because I weigh exactly 25. If I hadn't've had a bottle of soda, I'd've won it. You can give it to me."

"You think I choked on that bottle of soda for nothing? I know. It'll be for both of us. Half and half."

"Right!"

HOUSE ON FIRE, OR AN ICY RESCUE

Misha and I'd been playing a hard game of hockey and had forgotten all about everything else. When we finally asked a man what time it was he said,

"Exactly two."

We nearly keeled over. Two o'clock! Why, we'd only been playing for about five minutes, and here it was two o'clock! Yikes! We were late for school! I snatched my briefcase and yelled,

"Run, Misha!"

We dashed off like greased lightning, but soon got tired and slowed down to a walk.

"There's no sense hurrying now, 'cause we're late anyway," Misha said.

"We're in for it. And we don't have a good excuse, either."

"Let's think of one. Come on, think fast!"

"Let's say we each had a toothache and we went to the dentist to have our teeth pulled."

Misha made a face. "You mean our teeth began to ache at the same time, like on signal? They'll say we're lying. And if you have a tooth pulled you have a hole where it used to be."

"What we'll do? You know what? We'll think of something special, something brave, so they'll praise us for being late. How's that?"

"Like what?"

"Well, like say there was a fire someplace and we saved a baby. See?"

"Gee! A fire's a swell excuse. Or we can say that a baby fell through the ice in the pond, right into the water, and we saved it. That'll sound good, too."

"Yes, but a fire's better."

"No, it isn't," Misha said. "Thin ice on the pond is much better!"

We kept on arguing until we reached school. After we'd taken off our hats and coats the woman who worked in the cloakroom said,

"Look, Misha. You're missing two buttons on your jacket. What happened? You can't go to class like this. You're late anyway, so sit down while I sew some on. See, I have a whole box of buttons just for such emergencies. Go on upstairs, Dennis. There's no sense in you hanging around here."

"Hurry up, Misha, I don't want to get all the blame," I said.

The woman from the cloakroom made me go up and said Misha'd be right along.

I opened the classroom door a crack, stuck my head in and heard Raisa Ivanovna dictating:

"The fled-ge-lings were chir-ping."

Valery was at the blackboard, writing crookedly: "The fled je lings were chur ping."

I laughed. Raisa Ivanovna looked up and saw me, so I said,

"May I enter, Raisa Ivanovna?"

"Oh, it's you, Dennis. Yes, do come in. I was wondering where you were all this time."

I entered the classroom and stood by the bookcase. Raisa Ivanovna stared at me. She was amazed.

"What a sight! Where've you been? What've you been doing?"

I didn't have my story down pat, so I had to talk fast to stall for time. "It wasn't just me... It was Misha and me... That's what. Yep. You can't imagine. That's how it was!" And so on.

"What? You're too excited. Don't talk so fast. I can't understand a word you're

saying. Now tell me slowly where you were and what happened."

I didn't know what to say, but I had to say something. Yet, what could I say if there was nothing to say? So I said, "Misha and me... Well... It was like this.... We were on our way to school. Just walking along, minding our own business. Because we didn't want to be late. And all of a sudden.... You'll never believe it, Raisa Ivanovna! It was really something!"

Everybody started laughing and shouting, Valery louder than anyone else, because he must've known he was going to get a "D" for those "fled je lings". But now the lesson'd been interrupted and he could stare at me and laugh. He was all doubled up. Raisa Ivanovna put an end to the commotion in a jiffy.

"Quiet, children! Now, Dennis, I want you to tell me very clearly where you both were and where Misha is right now."

I was beginning to sweat by now, and the next thing I knew I was saying, "There was a fire there!"

It became very still. Raisa Ivanovna turned pale and said,

"Where?"

"Near our house. In the small house in the yard. Smoke was pouring out of the windows. And Misha and I were walking by just then... Along the back. And somebody'd leaned a board against the back door, so you couldn't open it. And we were just walking by, just then, and smoke was pouring out of the house! And somebody was crying. And choking. Inside. So we took down the board and there was a little girl. Crying. And choking. We grabbed her hands and feet and saved her. And then her mother came running and said, 'What's your names? I want to write about you boys to the papers.' And we said, 'Oh, don't bother thanking us for such a small girl. It's not worth it. And, anyway, we're very modest.' There. So we walked away. May I sit down, Raisa Ivanovna?"

She stood up and came over to me. She looked very serious and happy, and said, "I'm very proud of you and Misha. You're fine boys. Go to your seat. Sit down. Rest a while."

She looked like she wanted to pat my head or even kiss me, and it made me feel sort of sick. I slouched over to my desk. Everybody was watching me, as if I'd

really done something great. I was feeling awful. Just then the door opened and Misha stuck his head in. Everybody turned to look at him. Raisa Ivanovna smiled and said,

"Come in, Misha dear. Go to your seat. Sit down and rest a while, because I know it was a great strain on you, too."

"It sure was! I was afraid you'd be mad."

"Not if you have such a good reason for being late. You needn't have worried. After all, you and Dennis saved a child. It's not something that happens every day."

Misha gaped. He looked like he'd completely forgotten our agreement.

"Ch-ch-child? S-s-saved? Who d-d-did?" he stuttered.

I saw he was going to ruin everything if I didn't give him some help. So I smiled a real friendly smile and said, "No use pretending, Misha. I've told her what happened."

Meanwhile, I was looking at him hard, so's he'd understand I'd lied real good and so's he wouldn't let me down. I was winking at him, with both eyes now. At last I saw that he'd remembered! He got into the swing of things right away.

Dear old Misha looked at the floor shyly, like Mommy's little darling, and said in an icky voice,

"Oh, you shouldn't have. It was really nothing." And he even blushed, like a real actor.

Good for Misha! I'd never expected him to catch on so quickly. He sat down at his desk and began taking his notebooks out of his briefcase. Everybody gaped. They stared at me, too. It all would've probably ended then and there if Misha hadn't suddenly opened his big mouth. He looked around and said, "He wasn't really heavy. He only weighed about ten or fifteen kilos."

"Who? Who only weighed about ten or fifteen kilos?" Raisa Ivanovna asked.

"The boy."

"Which boy?"

"The one we pulled out of the pond when the ice broke."

"What? But the child was a girl! And where does the ice come in?"

"The ice? There's always ice on the pond in winter. Dennis and me were just walking along when we heard somebody shouting and splashing around in a hole in the ice. Really thrashing, you might say. Trying to get hold of the edge of the ice. But you know what thin ice is like. It kept breaking off around the edges. Anyway, Dennis and me crawled out across the ice to the hole and we pulled him out by his arms and legs. Then his grandfather came running. He was bawling and sobbing."

There was nothing I could do. Misha was lying even better than I'd done. By now the kids had guessed he was and that I'd been lying, too, so that after every sentence they howled. I was signalling to him to shut up, because he wasn't saying the right things at all, but it was no use. Misha didn't even notice. He just babbled on and on.

"Then his grandfather said, 'I want you to have my gold watch, because you saved my grandson.' And we said, 'No, thanks. We don't accept gifts, because we're modest.'"

That was the limit! I shouted, "Misha's all mixed up! It was a fire!"



"You nuts or something? How could there be a fire in a hole in the ice? You're all mixed up," he snapped.

By now the kids were falling off their seats. Raisa Ivanovna suddenly slapped her desk real hard, and everyone shut up in a minute. Misha was standing there with his mouth still open when she said,

"For shame! It's disgraceful! And I thought you were such fine boys! We will now continue the lesson."

Nobody was looking at us any more. Everything was very quiet and awful. I wrote Misha a note:

"See? We should've told her the truth."

This is what he wrote me: "I know. Or else, we should've got our stories straight."

IF

One day I was just sitting and thinking, and I suddenly thought of something that really surprised me. How wonderful everything would be if everything were topsy-turvy! For instance, if kids ran everything in the world and grownups had to obey them. I mean, if grownups were like children and children were like grownups. It would really be great. And interesting.

First of all, I can imagine how disgusted Mommy'd be if she had to obey me, and Daddy, too, to say nothing of Gran, who'd probably spend her days bawling. Say we'd be having dinner.

I'd say to Mommy, "Why haven't you had your bread? Look at yourself! You're a bag of bones! Start eating immediately!" And she'd stare at her plate miserably and start eating, but I'd be at her anyway, "Hurry up! Don't dawdle! Chew your food properly! Stop swinging your legs!"

And then Daddy'd come home after work, and before he'd have a chance to take off his coat, I'd begin to scold.

"It's about time! You're always late for meals! Go wash your hands this minute! That's no way to wash them! You're only smearing the dirt around. The towels are filthy after you wipe your hands on them. Use the nail brush, and don't spare the soap. Let me see your nails. You call these nails? They're claws! Where's the scissors? Hold still! I am not cutting your flesh. I'm doing it very carefully. And stop sniffing, you're not a crybaby. There. Now you can go to the table," I'd say to Daddy.

Then he'd go to his place and sit down and whisper to Mommy,

"How are you?"

And she'd whisper back, "Fine, thank you."

And I'd snap, "Stop talking at the table! This is no time for conversations! I see I'll never be able to teach you good manners. Daddy! Put that paper down immediately! Oh, dear Lord!"

And they'd sit there as still as mice, and if Gran came in I'd squint and throw up

my hands.

"Daddy! Mommy! Look at Granny! Did you ever see such a sight? Her coat's unbuttoned, her hat's on cockeyed. She's all perspired! My goodness! Were you playing hockey again? Well? Were you? And what's this muddy stick? Why'd you drag it into the house? What? Oh, so it's a hockey stick? Well, take it back outside this minute!" I'd say to Gran.

Then I'd walk up and down and say, "I want all of you to start doing your homework right after dinner. I'm going to the movies."

Naturally, they'd all begin to whine, "We want to go, too! Can we go, too?"

And I'd say, "By no means! You went to a birthday party yesterday, and I took you to the circus last Sunday. Indeed! If you could have your way, you'd go to parties every day of the week. You're to stay home and do your homework! I'll give you thirty kopecks for ice cream, but that's all!"

Then Gran would whine, "Won't you even take me? Every child can be accompanied by one grownup for free!"

But I'd say, "Grownups over 70 are not allowed to see this movie. So stay home, party girl!"



And I'd walk past them, stamping loudly on purpose, as if I couldn't see their eyes were full of tears. Then I'd put on my hat and coat and stand in front of the mirror looking at myself for a long time. And then I'd open the front door and say...

But I didn't have a chance to think of what I'd say, because just then Mommy came in, my real-life Mommy, and said,

"Are you still staring at your plate? Start eating immediately! Look at yourself! You're a bag of bones!"

A GOOD SOLUTION

"Look at this!" Mommy said. "See how I spend my holidays? All I ever see is dirty dishes. Piles of dirty dishes!"

Daddy sighed in sympathy and leaned back on the couch.

Mommy saw how comfortable he was and said, "I don't need your false sighs of sympathy. I'm giving you both exactly until lunch time to think of a way to help me with the dishes. If you don't come up with anything good I'll stop cooking for you. You can just go hungry. And I mean you, too, Dennis."

I went to sit on the windowsill and began thinking. First of all, I was afraid she'd really stop cooking, and then I'd die of starvation. Secondly, I really did want to think of something good. I sat there thinking, looking at Daddy every now and then to see how he was coming along, but I saw he had no intention of doing any thinking. First, he went off and shaved. Then he put on a clean shirt. Then he read the papers. And then he turned on the radio.

I started thinking faster. I decided to make an electric dishwasher. For a starter, I unscrewed our floor polisher and Daddy's electric razor, just a little bit, but I couldn't think of a place to hang the dishtowel. The way I had it, the minute I turned on the dishwasher the razor would slice up the towel. So I screwed everything back again and started thinking of something else. After about two hours I remembered the piece I'd read in the paper about a conveyer belt and thought of something really good. When it was time for lunch and we all took our places at the table I said,

"Well, Daddy? Did you think of anything?"

"What?"

"I mean about washing the dishes. Or else Mommy'll stop cooking for us."

"She was only fooling. Why, she'll never starve her only son and beloved husband." He chuckled.

"I was not fooling!" Mommy said. "Just you wait and see. You should be ashamed of yourselves! How many times have I told you I'm sick and tired of doing the dishes every day! It's not at all nice of you to sit on the windowsill, shave and listen to the radio while I'm ruining my life washing your dirty dishes."



"All right," Daddy said. "We'll think of something. But first, let's have lunch. This really is a storm in a teacup!"

"Oh, it is, is it?" Mommy looked real mad. "I never thought you'd say such a thing! Well, if that's the case, there won't be any lunch. See how you like that!"

She pressed her fingers to her head and stood up. She just stood there, looking at Daddy for a long time. He folded his arm across his chest and rocked back and forth in his chair, looking straight at her. Neither of them said a word. And there was no lunch. I was starved, so I said,

"It's just Daddy who didn't think of anything, Mommy. I did!"

Don't you worry. I thought of something really good. So let's have lunch."

"What is it?"

"It's a very good solution."

"Tell me."

"How many plates, bowls, forks, knives, spoons and cups do you wash each time?" I asked.

"Three of each."

"Your worries are over. From now on you'll only have to wash one of each. I've thought of a real good solution!"

"Let's hear it," Daddy said.

"Let's have lunch first. I'll tell you while we're eating, because I'm starved."

"All right," Mommy said and sighed. "Let's have a lunch."

"Well?" Daddy said as we were eating.

"It's really very simple. You won't even believe how simple it is, Mommy! Now, as soon as it's time for dinner you set one place. Then you put a bowl of soup on the table, sit down and eat your soup. Then you call Daddy and say, 'Dinner's ready.'"

"Daddy goes to wash his hands, and while he's washing them you finish your soup and fill the bowl up again for him.

"When Daddy's done washing his hands he says to me, 'Time for dinner, Dennis. Go wash your hands.'

"Then I go to wash my hands. Meanwhile, you're having the main dish on a dinner plate. Daddy's having his soup. I'm washing my hands. After I'm through washing them I come to the kitchen. By then Daddy's through with his soup and you're through with your meat, so that Daddy ladles my soup into his bowl and you serve him his meat on your empty plate. Then I have my soup, Daddy has his meat, and you have dessert from a dessert plate."

"By the time Daddy's through with his meat, I'll be through with my soup. Then he puts my meat on his empty plate, and since

you've finished your dessert, you put his dessert on your empty plate. I set aside my empty soup bowl and start eating my meat, while Daddy's having his dessert. By this time you're all through with dinner, so you can wash the soup bowl.

"While you're washing it I finish my meat and Daddy finishes his dessert. Then he dishes out my dessert and hands you my dinner plate. I gobble up my dessert and hand you my dessert plate. Isn't that simple? So you'll only have to wash one of each instead of three of each. Hooray!"

"Hooray," Mommy said. "If not for the fact that it's unhygienic."

"Don't be silly," I said. "We're all one family. I don't mind eating after Daddy at all. He's my Daddy. Or after you. You're my Mommy."

"It's really a very good idea," Daddy said. "But still, it's much nicer when we all sit down to dinner together instead of doing it in three shifts."

"But it'll make life easier for Mommy, because she'll have three times less dishes to wash."

"You know, I think I've thought of something, too," Daddy said. "It's not as efficient as your method, but still..."

Daddy got up. He rolled up his sleeves and began stacking the dishes. "I'll show you a very simple method. The idea is that from now on you and I are going to do the dishes, Dennis."

He carried the dishes to the sink. We washed them all. Just two of everything, though, because I broke my dishes. It was an accident. I was too busy thinking about the good solution Daddy'd thought of to see where I was going.

CHICKEN SOUP

Mommy brought home a large chicken. It had a bright-red comb. She put it in the fridge and said, "If Daddy comes home before I come back tell him to put it up. You won't forget, will you?"

"Of course not."

Mommy went off to her college. I took out my paintbox and decided to paint a squirrel jumping from tree to tree in the forest. It looked pretty keen at first, but then it stopped looking like a squirrel and began looking like a funny man. The squirrel's tail was his nose and the branches on the trees were his hair and ears and hat. I really surprised myself.

"Guess what this is, Daddy?" I said when Daddy came home.

He didn't say anything for a while but kept looking at it. "A fire?" he said at last.

"No! Look again."

He did and said, "It must be a soccer game."

"You're not trying to think. You must be very tired."

"No, I'm just hungry. D'you know what's for dinner?"

"There's a chicken in the fridge. Mommy said to cook it."

Daddy got out the chicken and put it on the kitchen table. "Easier said than done. It's no problem to cook a chicken. The idea is to decide on a recipe. There are at least a hundred fine chicken dishes. For instance, chicken cutlets, or chicken in wine. Or chicken fricassee. That'll make your mouth water. There's stuffed chicken, or you can fry it with a heavy weight like an iron on top of the lid and then pour garlic sauce on it. Then you'll have a Georgian dish called 'Chicken tabaka'. Then you can..."

"Make something simple that you don't have to iron. Something that won't take long," I interrupted.

"Right! The main thing is to get it done quickly. What'll it be? Chicken soup? That's the fastest." Daddy even rubbed his hands.

"D'you know how to make chicken soup?"

Daddy chuckled. "What's so hard about that? It's easy as pie. You put a chicken in a pot of water and wait till it's cooked. That's all there is to it. It's decided, then. We're going to make chicken soup. Before you know it, we'll have a two-course dinner. Chicken soup and bread and butter, and hot, steaming boiled chicken "

"What do I do?"

"See these little hairs on the chicken? You cut them off. I'll put the water on to boil meanwhile."

I took Mommy's manicure scissors and began cutting the fine hairs off one by one. At first I thought there'd just be a few of them, but when I saw there were a lot, I began snipping away like a real barber.

"Don't forget the sideburns," Daddy said. "Think it's easy?" -

Daddy suddenly clapped his hand to his forehead. "What dunces we are! How could I've forgotten? Put down the scissors, Dennis. It has to be held over a flame to singe the hair. Understand? That's the way everybody does it."

He lit another burner, because the pot of water was warming on one, and singed the chicken. It began to burn. The whole house was beginning to smell like burnt wool. Daddy kept turning it, saying, "Just a few more minutes now. This'll really be delicious. As soon as we singe all the hair it'll be clean and white."

For some reason or other, though, the chicken was getting blacker and blacker. It looked real charred by the time Daddy finally turned off the gas.

"It looks sort of smoked, doesn't it? D'you like smoked chicken?" he asked.

"No. And it's not smoked. It's all covered with soot. I'll wash it off."

"That's a great idea! You're a smart boy. You take after me. That's for sure. All right, go ahead and wash it. I'll take a break meanwhile." He sat down on a kitchen stool.



"It'll only take a minute," I said. I let the water run in the sink, held the chicken under it in one hand, and started rubbing hard with the other. The chicken was hot and dirty. My hands and arms were soon black and greasy. Daddy was rocking back and forth on the stool.

"See what you've done to it, Daddy? The dirt won't come off. It's all full of soot."

"We'll soon take care of that. The soot's only on the surface. You never heard of a chicken that consisted entirely of soot, did you? Be right back," he said and went off to the bathroom. He came back with a large cake of pink soap. "Here. This'll do the trick. Soap it good and hard!"

I began soaping the poor chicken. It looked miserable. I was soaping it good, but it wasn't getting any cleaner, even though streams of black, soapy water kept running off it for I don't know how long.

"It's getting all smeary from the soap."

"Use the brush then. First do the back and then the rest. That should get it clean."

So I started brushing it as hard as I could. The skin was even coming off in places. It was a tricky job, because the chicken was getting so slippery you'd think it was alive. All Daddy was doing, meanwhile, was giving me orders.

"You've got to get a better grip on it. Hold it by the wing! Not like that! I'm afraid you don't know how to wash a chicken."

"Here, Daddy, you do it." I handed him the chicken. The minute his hand closed over it, it slipped off right under the kitchen cabinet. This didn't faze Daddy.

"Get me the floor brush!"

I handed him the floor brush and he started knocking it around under the kitchen cabinet. First, he pulled out an old mousetrap. Then a tin soldier I thought I'd lost and was so happy to find again. Finally, the chicken appeared. It was full of dust. Daddy was as red as a beet from bending over so long. He grabbed hold of a leg and carried it back to the sink.

"Well, bluebird, let's see you get away this time!" he said and stuck it under the faucet. He rinsed it off pretty good and then dropped it into the pot of hot water.

Just then Mommy came home. "What in the world's going on here?"

Daddy sighed and said, "We're cooking the chicken."

"Has it been cooking for long?"

"I just put it up."

Mommy lifted the lid. "Did you salt the water?"

"I will when it's done."

Mommy sniffed at the pot. "Did you clean out the insides?"

"I will after it's done."

Mommy groaned and dumped the chicken and the boiling water into the sink.

"Hand me my apron, please, Dennis. I see it's no use asking you two to help."

I handed Mommy her apron and went to get the picture I'd painted. "Guess what this is, Mommy?"

"My sewing machine?"

THE KNIGHTS

When the boys' choir was through rehearsing Boris Sergeyevich said, "Tell me what you gave your mothers for Women's Day. We'll start with you, Dennis."

"I gave her a pincushion. It's very beautiful. It looks just like a frog. My fingers are still sore, 'cause it took me so long to make them. I kept pricking my fingers all the time. I made two."

"We all made two of them," Misha added. "One for our mothers and one for our teacher Raisa Ivanovna."

"But why'd you all make pincushions? It seems so strange,"

Boris Sergeyevich said.

"That's because we're doing pincushions in arts and crafts. We did devils, and now we're doing pincushions," Valery said.

"What kind of devils?"

"Clay devils. Volodya and Tolya do arts and crafts with us. They're in 8A. We did clay devils a whole semester. Every time we had a class they'd say, 'Go on, start making devils.' Then, while we were busy making devils, they'd play chess."

"Incredible!" Boris Sergeyevich said. "Pincushions! This bears looking into." He suddenly burst out laughing. "How many boys are there in your class, Misha?"

"Fifteen. And twenty-five girls."

"There are more women in our country than men," I said.

Boris Sergeyevich wouldn't let me continue. "That's not what I'm talking about," he said. "I'd like to have seen the expression on Raisa Ivanovna's face when she was presented with fifteen pincushions. All right, now tell me who intends to give his mother a present on May Day?"

Now it was our turn to laugh.

"You must be fooling," I said.

"Not at all. You should give your mothers presents on every holiday. That'll be acting like knights in shining armor. Do any of you know what a knight is?"

"A knight's a horseman in an iron suit," I said.

Boris Sergeyevich nodded. "Yes, those were the knights of old. When you're bigger you'll read books about them, but when people speak about a man being a knight in shining armor nowadays they mean a person who is noble, brave and kind-hearted. I think that all you boys should be as fine as knights in shining armor. Now, which of you are knights? Raise your hands."

Everyone raised his hand.

"I knew it. Good for you!"

Then we all went home. On the way Misha said. "I've got some money, and I'm going to buy my Mommy some candy."

There was nobody home when I got back. I was feeling sort of low, because now that I'd finally decided to be a knight, I didn't have any money. Misha rang the bell soon after. He was holding a nice little box of candy.

"See? I'm a knight now. Why aren't you doing anything about a present?"

"Are you a real knight, Misha?"

"Sure."

"Then lend me some money."

Misha frowned. "I spent all I had."

"What'll I do?"

"Let's look. Maybe a coin rolled off someplace. Let's look."

We searched everywhere: behind the couch and under the wardrobe, and I shook out each and every one of Mommy's shoes and even poked my finger into her box of face powder. We couldn't find a single coin.

Then Misha opened the cupboard. "Look! What's this?"

"What's which? Oh. It's two bottles of wine. Can't you see? One's purple and the other's yellow. It's for our guests. We're having company tomorrow."

"If you had company yesterday you'd have some money now."

"How?"

"The bottles. There's a deposit on every bottle."

"Why didn't you say so? Now I know what to do. Give me that big jar on the windowsill. The one the stewed fruit was in."

Misha handed me the empty jar. I opened one bottle and poured the dark purple wine into it.

"Right. It won't get spoiled in there," Misha said.

"What'll I do with this bottle?"

"Pour it in on top of that. It's all wine, so it won't make any difference."

"You're right. If one was wine and the other was gasoline, then I couldn't, but this'll be fine. Here, hold the jar." I poured the second bottle of wine into it. "Set it on the windowsill. There. And cover it with a saucer. All right. Come on, let's go!"

We ran downstairs and cashed the bottles in at the store. I got 24 kopecks for the two and bought Mommy some hard candy. I even got two kopecks change. I was feeling great, because now I was a knight, too.

As soon as Mommy and Daddy got home I said, "I'm a knight now, Mommy. Boris Sergeyevich told us all about it."

"Then tell me."

I said I was going to give her a present the next day, and she wanted to know where I'd gotten the money for it.

"I got the deposit on the bottles. And here's two kopecks change."

"That shows initiative," Daddy said.

We sat down to dinner. Then Daddy leaned back in his chair and said, "How about some stewed fruit?"

"We don't have any left," Mommy said.

Daddy winked at me and said, "Well, what's that? I've had my eye on that jar for some time." He went over to the window, lifted the saucer and took a sip right from the jar. He made a terrible face and said, "What kind of poison is this?"

"Don't worry, Daddy, it's not poison. It's your two wines."

"Which two wines?" he said and his voice got real loud.

"The purple one and the yellow one. The ones that were in the cupboard. But don't worry, they're not spoiled."

Daddy opened the cupboard door. He blinked. Then he looked at me so strangely you'd think I had spots or stripes.

"Why're you so surprised? I poured your two wines into the jar, 'cause I needed the empty bottles."

"Oh!" Mommy cried and collapsed on a chair. She was having a laughing fit. She was laughing so hard I thought she'd get sick. I didn't see what was so funny.

"Oh, so you're laughing, are you?" Daddy shouted. "If you'd like to know, this knight in shining armor will drive me mad! I think I'd better give him a good spanking to make him forget his knightly ways for good." Daddy looked like he was looking for his strap.

"Where is he?" Daddy roared. "Where's he disappeared to? Will no one tell me where young Ivanhoe is?"



I was hiding behind the bookcase. In fact, I'd been there for quite some time, just in case, because Daddy was very excited. He was still shouting.

"Did you ever hear of anyone pouring vintage muscatel into a jar and then adding beer to it?"

Mommy could hardly get the words out: "It was... He had the best of intentions.... After all ... he's a knight.... Oh ... I can't breathe!" And she kept on laughing.

Daddy paced up and down for a few minutes more. Then all of a sudden he went over to her and said, "I love the way you laugh."

Then he bent down and kissed her.

Then I came out from behind the bookcase.

THE DOG SNATCHER

I was staying with my Uncle Volodya at his country cottage. His next-door neighbor was Boris Ivanovich, a tall, thin, smiling man who had a cane. His dog's name was Chapa. Chapa was a shaggy, black Scotch terrier. We soon became good friends.

One day Boris Ivanovich decided to go swimming, but he didn't want to take Chapa along, because he'd taken him once before and it had all ended in a terrible uproar. Chapa had made straight for the water where a nervous lady was floating around on a big inner tube to keep from drowning.

"Go away! Take this horrid beast away!" she screeched and began splashing Chapa.

Chapa doesn't like to be splashed. He tried to snap at the lady, but since he couldn't reach her, he sunk his teeth into her rubber tube. He only did it once, but the tube began to hiss. All the air went out of it.

"Help! Save me!" The nervous lady screamed. She decided she was drowning.

There was great commotion on the beach. Boris Ivanovich rushed to the rescue. It was very shallow there, but the lady kept thrashing about. When she finally stood up the water only came to her waist. Boris Ivanovich saved her and then swished a twig at Chapa to make it look like he was punishing him. He never took Chapa bathing again.

Now Boris Ivanovich asked me to play with Chapa in the yard so he wouldn't chase after him. I went over to their yard and Chapa and I began to run and tumble, hop, jump and spin, bark and squeal, laugh and roll around.

Meanwhile, Boris Ivanovich went off to the river. Chapa and I fooled around till we got tired. That's when a boy I knew named Vanya came walking by the fence. He was carrying a fishing rod.

"Let's go fishing, Dennis!" he called.

"I can't, I'm minding Chapa."

"Lock him in the house. You can catch up with me," he said and walked off.

I got hold of Chapa's collar. He rolled over on his back, so I had to drag him carefully across the grass. I opened the door, pulled him into the hall, closed the door and went for my net.

By the time I reached the road Vanya was gone. He'd turned the corner and disappeared. I raced after him, but stopped dead in my tracks when I got to the small shop. Chapa was sitting in the middle of the road. His tongue was lolling out and he was looking at me innocently. That was a fine how-d'you-do! I probably hadn't shut the door tight enough. Or else he'd escaped through a window and taken a short cut across the back gardens. Here he was now, waiting for me. Chapa was one smart dog.

I'd have to hurry. Vanya was probably pulling in the fish, while here I was, stuck with Chapa. I'd've gladly taken him along, but if Boris Ivanovich got back and saw him gone he'd begin to worry and would go off hunting for him. Everybody'd be angry at me. I had no choice. I'd have to drag Chapa back to the house.

I got hold of his collar again and began pulling him but this time Chapa dug his paws into the ground, so I had to drag him along on his belly like a frog. I was all in by the time I got him back to the house.

I opened the door a crack, shoved him in and then pulled it shut. Chapa growled and barked, but I didn't stay to talk to him. I walked all around the house, closed all the windows and the gate.

Even though I was beat, I headed off for the river at a run. I was trotting along and had gotten as far as a wooden shed when - guess what? Chapa came running out from behind it! I was flabbergasted. I was sure I was seeing things. Chapa suddenly began to look like he was going to bite me for having locked him up again. He growled and barked at me. I tried to grab him by the collar, but he kept wriggling out of my grasp, backing away and barking all the time.

"Here, Chapa-Chapa! Here, boy!" I coaxed.

He kept right on teasing me. Besides, I was clutching my net and kept stumbling over it. So we pranced around. All of a sudden I remembered a movie I'd seen on TV. It was called "Jungle Trails" and was about hunters in China who used big

nets to catch monkeys. That gave me an idea. I tossed my net over Chapa and caught him like a monkey. He barked and barked, but I rolled him up in the net, slung it over my shoulder and started off down the street with my catch like a real hunter.

Chapa was hanging over my shoulder, swinging in the net as if he were in hammock and yapping every now and then, but I paid no attention. When I reached the house I lifted him over the windowsill and shook him out onto the floor. Then I closed the window and leaned a pole against it.

Chapa barked and whined. For the third time I ran off down the road after Vanya. Actually, an awful lot of time had passed, because Vanya was coming back. He looked very pleased. He had two fishes, each one as big as a teaspoon, strung on a long stiff stem of grass.

"Boy! That's some catch!" I said.

"They kept biting all the time. I barely had time to pull them in. Come on. We'll take my catch to my mother for dinner and then we can go fishing again. You might catch something, too."

Before we knew it we'd reached Boris Ivanovich's cottage.

There was a small crowd outside the fence: a man in striped trousers with a stomach as big as a pillow, a lady in slacks and a halter, a boy wearing glasses, and some other people. They were all waving and making noise. The boy spotted me and yelled,

"There he is! That's him!"

Everyone turned.

"Which one? The one with the rod or the little one?" the man in striped trousers shouted.

"The little one! Don't let him get away!" They all raced towards me. I got a little scared and ran off. I dropped my net and climbed a high fence. I knew they couldn't get me now.

The lady in the halter ran up to the fence and began shrieking hysterically, "Give

me back my dog! Where'd you put my dog, you horrible child?"

Meanwhile, the man was pounding his fists on the fence and shouting, "Where's my dog? Where'd you take her? Out with it!"

"Leave me alone," I said. "I don't know what you're talking about. I've never seen your dogs in my life! You tell them, Vanya!"

"Leave the child alone!" Vanya shouted. "I'll go tell my mother on you, and you'll be sorry!"

"Run for her, Vanya!"

"Hang on, Dennis! Stay where you are!" And he was off.

"The other boy's an accomplice," the man said. "Why, there's a whole gang of them! Hey, you! Where's Cookie?"

"How do I know where your daughter is?"

"Oh, so you're a smart aleck? You get down this minute! We're going to the militia station."

"I will not!"

"Wait! I'll get him!" The boy who wore glasses said and tried to climb the fence, but he couldn't, because he didn't know about the nail that gave you a toehold. I'd climbed that fence a hundred times before. Besides, I was kicking at him, to keep him down

"Wait, Pavel," the pillow-man said. "I'll give you a hand-up."

So the boy named Pavel climbed up on the man's back. I was getting worried again, because Pavel was so big. He must've been in the third or fourth grade. This was curtains for me. But then I spotted Boris Ivanovich jogging along and Vanya and his mother running from the opposite direction, shouting,

"Stop! What's going on here?"

"Nothing is!" the man in the striped trousers shouted back. "This kid's been

stealing dogs! He stole mine."

Then the lady in slacks said, "And he stole mine, too!"

"I'll never believe that. Never," Vanya's mother said.

Then the boy named Pavel said, "I saw him. He had my dog rolled up in a net slung over his shoulder. I was up in the attic, looking down, and I saw him!"

"Quit lying! That was Chapa. He kept running away!"

"I know this boy to be a very honest child," Boris Ivanovich said. "I see no reason for him to have suddenly become a thief. A dog snatcher. Won't you all come inside? We'll discuss it calmly. You, too, Dennis."

He came over to the fence and I crawled right onto his shoulders, because, as I said, he was very tall.

Everybody went into the yard. The pillow-man was snorting, the lady was wringing her hands and Pavel was trotting behind. I rode in on Boris Ivanovich's shoulders. We climbed the porch steps. When Boris Ivanovich opened the door three black dogs tumbled out. As alike as peas in a pod. I thought I was seeing things.

"Here, Cookie!" the man shouted.

And one Chapa jumped on him, landing on his stomach!

The lady and Pavel both shouted, "Bobo! Bobo!" They looked like they were going to pull the second Chapa apart, because she was tugging at the front paws and he was tugging at the hind paws. All this time the third Chapa was standing next to us and wagging his tail.

"So that's what you're like!" Boris Ivanovich said. "I never expected it of you.



Why'd you cram the house full of other people's dogs?"

"I thought they were Chapa. Don't they all look alike? They've all got the same faces. They're just like triplets."

So I told them the story from the very beginning, and they all began to laugh. Finally, Boris Ivanovich said,

"I can see how you might've been mistaken. Scotch terriers are so alike it really is hard to tell them apart. Take what happened now, for instance. It was the dogs who recognized us, and not us who recognized our dogs. So you're not to blame. But I think that from now on I'll call you Dog Snatcher."

And that's what he's been calling me.

TOP TO BOTTOM, BACK AND FORTH!

The summer before I started school our apartment house was being repaired. There were heaps of bricks and boards in the yard and a big pile of sand which we took over whenever we played games or made tunnels.

We were having a lot of fun and got to know the workers. We even helped them renovate the house. One day I took down a kettle of water to them and another time Lena showed the electricians where the back stairs were. We helped them in a lot of other ways, too, but I've forgotten which now.

Then one day they were all through with the job and were leaving. Before he left one of the men even shook hands with us and gave me a big bolt I needed.

After the workers were gone three young women showed up. They had on wonderful clothes: men's pants which had different colored paint splattered all over them and that made them hard and stiff. When they walked their pants sounded like sheets of iron rattling on a roof. They also wore paper hats made of folded newspapers which were very beautiful. They were house-painters and were called a team. They laughed a lot and sang, and one of the songs they sang was "Lillies of the Valley". I don't like that song. Lena and Misha don't like it, either. But we did like to watch them working, because they did everything so fast and so good. Their names were Sanya, Raya and Nellie.

We were watching them one day and Sanya said,

"Will one of you please go and find out what time it is?"

I went and found out, and came back, and said, "It's five to twelve."

"Time for lunch, girls! I'm going to the cafeteria," Sanya said and left. Raya and Nellie followed her out of the yard. They left the big can of paint open, and the pump and rubberhose. We went up real close to have a look at the part of the house they'd been painting. It looked fine. It was very even and brown, with a little red mixed in. Misha looked at it for a long time.

"D'you think if I pump this pump the paint'll spray out of the hose?" he said.

"I bet it won't," Lena said.

"I bet it will!" I said.

"Don't argue," Misha said. "Let's see. You hold the hose, Dennis, and I'll pump."

He pumped up and down a couple of times and paint suddenly began spraying out of the hose! It made a loud hissing sound like a snake, because the nozzle at the end of the hose had a lot of little holes in it, just like a watering can, except that these holes were very small and the spray was very fine.

"Go on! Start painting something!" Misha shouted.

I aimed the hose at an unpainted part of the wall. The paint sprayed out over it, leaving a light-brown splash that looked like a spider.

"Hooray!" Lena shouted. "Look at it spurt!" and she held her leg up under the spray.

It only took a second for me to cover her leg from shoe to knee with paint. In a flash all her scratches and bruises disappeared under a shiny, even brown coat of paint that made her leg look like a shiny wooden tenpin.

"Hey, that's great! Hurry up! Hold up your other leg!" Misha shouted.

Lena held up her other leg and I gave it two good coats of paint, top to bottom.

"Isn't she beautiful!" Misha said. "Her legs are like a real Indian squaw's. Go on, paint her!"

"All over? All of her? From top to bottom?" I asked.

Lena squealed delightedly at the very thought of it. "Come on! Top to bottom! I'll be a real Indian squab!"

Misha began pumping like mad, and I began spraying Lena. I did a real fine job on her back, arms, shoulders, stomach and shorts. She became brown all over, except for her hair,



which was blond.

"How about her hair, Misha?"

"Sure! Go ahead!"

"Sure, go ahead!" Lena shouted. "And don't forget my ears!"

I finished painting her in no time flat and said, "Go stand in the sun and dry, Lena. What else can we paint?"

"See my mother's wash on the line? Let's paint it!" Misha said.

That was an easy job. It only took about a minute to spray the two big bath towels and Misha's shirt to make them look beautiful. Misha was pumping away like mad. "Come on, don't stop now! "See the new door downstairs? Let's paint it!"

I started spraying the door. Top to bottom! Bottom to top! Back and forth!

Just then, while we were still working on the door, it opened. The manager of our house stood there in a white summer suit.

He was thunderstruck. So was I. We stood there staring at each other, and I was so stunned I kept holding the hose on him, spraying him up and down, down and up, back and forth. I was too scared to trail the hose on the ground. His eyes were as big as saucers. But he didn't have the sense to jump aside, either.

Meanwhile, Misha was pumping away, shouting, "Come on! Paint everything!"

And Lena was prancing up and down, singing, "I'm a squab! I'm a squab!"

It's the truth.

I hate to even think of what happened after that. Misha had to wash the bath towels every day for two whole weeks. Lena was scrubbed in seven tubs of water and turpentine. Our parents had to buy the manager a new suit.

Mommy wouldn't let me out of the house at all, but I sneaked out anyway. When Sanya, Raya and Nellie saw me Raya said,

"Hurry up and grow up, Dennis, and you can join our team. You'll be a fine house painter!"

I've been trying to grow up real fast ever since.

THE CHIEF RIVERS

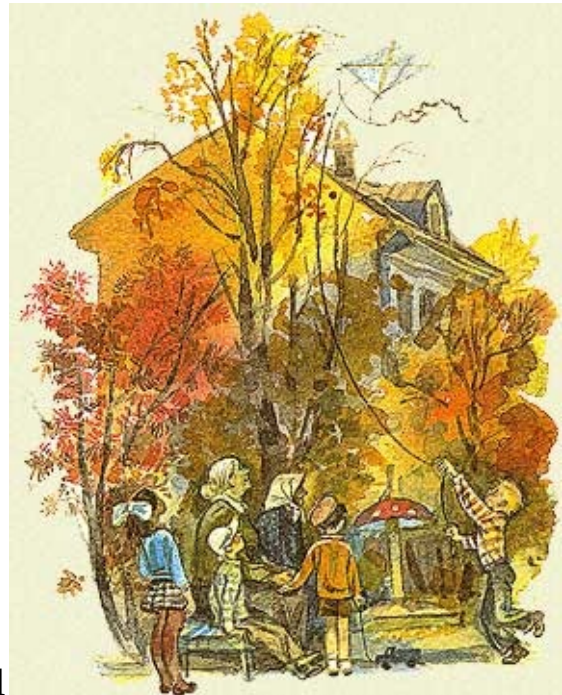
Even though I'm going on nine I only just finally understood that you really have to do your homework, whether you like it or not, whether you want to or not. There's no two ways about it, because if you don't you'll get into all kinds of messes.

Take yesterday, for instance, I had no time to do my homework. I was supposed to learn a poem by Nekrasov by heart. The geography assignment was to learn the chief rivers of North and South America. But instead of studying, I was busy flying my kite to outer space. It didn't reach there, because the tail was too light and it spun like a top. Besides, I didn't have enough string, so I had to use whatever I could find at home. Even though I took a spool from Mommy's sewing drawer it still wasn't enough. The kite only rose as high as the attic and stayed at that level. It was still a long way to outer space.

I was so busy flying it and thinking about outer space that I forgot all about my homework. That was something I never should have done.

I overslept a little the next morning, and when I bounded out of bed I hadn't a minute to spare. I'd read about firemen getting dressed in a flash and had liked the idea so much I'd been practicing jumping into my clothes all through the summer. When I got up and saw I was late I knew this was when I'd really have to get dressed as fast as a fireman rushing to a fire. It took me exactly 1 minute 48 seconds to get dressed completely, not counting the laces on my sneakers which I did on the run.

I just made it to school and got to my seat a second before Raisa Ivanovna entered the classroom. She'd been walking down the hall just as I was racing up from the cloakroom. I spotted her first and stepped on the gas, passing her just before she got to the classroom door. I'd made it by a couple of seconds, so that when she entered my books were in my desk and I was sitting



beside Misha looking calm and collected. We all rose to greet her. I greeted her louder than anyone else so she could see how polite I was, but it didn't make any difference to her.

"Come up to the blackboard, Dennis," was all she said.

This ruined the day, because I suddenly remembered I'd forgotten to do my homework. I didn't feel like standing up at all. I felt I was stuck to my desk.

"Well, Dennis? What's the matter? Didn't you hear me?"

I dragged myself over to the blackboard.

"Recite the poem," she said.

That was the poem we'd been assigned. I didn't know it. In fact, I wasn't even sure which poem we'd been assigned. What if she'd forgotten, too? Then she wouldn't notice if I'd recite something else, so I plunged right in:

'Tis winter! Lo, the peasant triumphs,
He lays a way through snowy roads,
His horse, inhaling winter's snowdrifts,
Will gaily snort and pull its load.

"That poem is by Pushkin," she said.

"Yes, it is. It was written by Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin."

"And what did I assign you?"

"Yes!"

"What do you mean by 'yes'? Will you please tell us what the assignment was."

"What?"

"What 'what'? Repeat the assignment, please."

Misha looked very innocent when he said, "You think he doesn't know you assigned us a poem by Nekrasov? He just didn't understand your question, Raisa Ivanovna."

A friend in need is a friend indeed. Misha was that kind of friend.

"Don't you dare prompt him, Misha!" Raisa Ivanovna snapped.

"Yes," I said. "Don't you think I know Raisa Ivanovna assigned us a poem by Nekrasov, Misha? You don't have to prompt me. I was just absent-minded. You're just getting me mixed up."

Misha glared at me and then looked away. That left me and Raisa Ivanovna.

"Well?" she said.

"What?" I said.

"Stop saying 'what!'" she was getting close to the boiling point.

"Recite the poem!"

"Huh?"

"The poem!"

"Oh, I see. You mean the poem?" Then I said in a very loud voice, "A poem by Nekrasov. The poet. A great poet. A great Russian poet Nekrasov. A poem..."

"Well?"

"What?"

"Start reciting this minute!" Raisa Ivanovna shouted. "This very minute! What's the title?"

While she was shouting Misha managed to whisper the first word of the title. He was hardly opening his mouth, but I understood him anyway. That's why I thrust one foot forward and repeated what I thought he'd said.

A sudden silence fell upon the class. Raisa Ivanovna was looking at me with interest. I was staring hard at Misha. He was holding up a finger and snapping the nail. It was supposed to mean something, but I didn't know what. Some of the kids had begun to giggle.

"That's enough, Dennis. There's no sense trying to remember something you never know in the first place. And how about your self-improvement program? Remember, we decided you'd do a lot of outside reading to increase your knowledge? The class learned the names of the chief rivers of America for today. Do you know them?"

Of course I didn't. That kite had ruined my life. Just as I was about to confess I heard myself saying, "Sure, I do. Of course I do."

"Well, then, I'd like you to improve the terrible impression you've made by your failure to recite Nekrasov's poem. Tell us which the longest river in North America is and you may go back to your seat."

That's when I really felt bad. I even got a stomach ache. Honest. It was so quiet you could've heard a pin drop. Everybody was staring at me. I was staring at the ceiling. I was positive I was going to die any minute. Goodbye, everybody! At that very moment I saw my friend Petya holding up a long strip of newspaper in the back row. There was writing on it and the letters were so big he must've written them by dipping his finger in the ink. I tried to make the writing out, and just as I'd made out the beginning, Raisa Ivanovna said,

"Well, Dennis? Can you tell us which the chief river of North America is?"

I was back on firm ground now. "Missy-pissy," I said.

I won't tell you what happened after that, but even though Raisa Ivanovna was laughing so hard there were tears running down her face, she gave me a big fat "D".

That's why I swore I'd do my homework from now on, right up to my old age.

THE GRAND MASTER'S HAT

That morning I did my homework quickly, because there wasn't much to do. For drawing I did a picture of a witch sitting by the window of her house reading a newspaper. Then I composed a sentence: "We bilt a howse." That was all I had to do. Then I put on my coat, broke off the heel of a fresh loaf of bread and went out. There's a large pond on the boulevard near our house, and there are swans, ducks, and geese in it. It was a very windy day. The wind was turning the leaves on the trees inside-out. It made the pond look ragged.

There was hardly anyone on the boulevard that day. Two boys I didn't know were chasing each other and a man was sitting on one of the benches playing chess all by himself. He was sitting sideways. His hat was on the bench behind him.

Just then a big gust of wind blew his hat off the bench. The man didn't notice it. He was just concentrating on the game.

Whenever Daddy and I play chess I concentrate on the game, too, because I'm always dying to win.

Anyway, the wind picked up his hat. It floated down in front of the boys who were racing on the walk. They both reached for it, but just then another gust of wind made it jump into the air as if it were alive. It sailed right into the pond, but it didn't land in the water. It landed on one of the swan's heads. The ducks and geese were scared out of their wits and scattered, but the other swans were very curious to see what this new thing was. They all swam towards the swan in the hat. It was shaking its head, trying to knock the hat off, but couldn't. The other swans didn't know what it was all about.

The two boys on the bank began whistling. They wanted the swan to swim towards them. "Here, boy! Here, boy!" they called.

You'd think a swan was a dog!

That's when I said, "I've got some bread that'll make it swim up to me. You find a long stick. We'll rescue the chessplayer's hat. He may even be a famous chessplayer, maybe even a Grand Master."

I got out my heel of bread and began crumbling it into the water. Soon all the swans, ducks and geese were swimming towards me, pushing each other and squawking. It was a real bird colony. The swan in the hat was right up front, bobbing for the bread. The hat finally fell into the water.

It was floating quite close to the bank. Just then the two boys, who'd managed to find a long stick with a nail on the end, came running. They began fishing for the hat, but the stick was a tiny bit short. They joined hands to make a chain, and the boy with the stick began fishing again.

"Try to poke the nail through the middle and then snap it back, like when you're fishing. You know?" I said.

"I'm going to end up in the water in another minute, because he's not holding me tight enough."

"Here, let me have a try," I said.

"All right, 'cause I feel like I'm going to fall in."

"Hold me by the belt, both of you," I said.

They gripped my belt. I held the stick in both hands, leaned all the way out over the water, swung and landed flat on my face. It's a good thing the mud was soft, so I didn't hurt myself.

"That's no way to hold me! Why'd you say you would if you can't?"

"We can too! Your belt tore off. That's why. See? There's even some of the cloth left on it."

"Stuff it in my pocket. Hold on to the bottom of my coat then. That won't tear. Here we go!"

I started fishing for the hat again. I waited till the wind blew it a little closer, but meanwhile kept moving the water towards the bank with the stick. I really wanted to take it back to the man on the bench. Maybe he really was a Grand Master. Maybe he was even Botvinnik. Maybe he'd just come outside for some fresh air. Things like that did happen sometimes. I'd give him back his hat and he'd say, "Why, thank you, Dennis!" And then we'd be photographed together,

and I'd show the picture to all my friends.

Maybe he'd even want to play a game of chess with me. What if I won? Things like that did happen sometimes. The hat was washed very close to the bank. I swung the stick and hooked the nail right through the crown.

"You got it!" the boys shouted.

I pulled the hat off the nail. It was soggy and heavy, so I said, "We've got to wring it out."

One of the boys took one end of it and started twisting it to the right, while I twisted to the left. Water ran out of it in streams. We wrung it out so good the lining ripped down the middle. The boy who hadn't helped wring it out said, "There. Now give it to me and I'll give it back to the man."

"That's what you think! I'll give it back to him," I said.



He started pulling the hat away from me, and the second boy helped him. It was a tug-of-war. The next thing I knew, they'd torn the lining out completely. Now they had the hat.

"I fed the swans bread and made them come up to the bank, so I'm the one who should give him his hat."

"But who got the stick to fish it out?"

"And whose belt got torn off his coat?"

Then one of the boys said to the other, "Let him have it, Mark. He'll get a licking anyway when he gets home and they see his coat's torn."

"Here's your lousy old hat," Mark said and kicked it into the air. I caught it and ran off to the bench where the man was playing chess.

"Here's your hat!" I shouted.

"Where?"

"Here." I held it out to him.

"That's not mine. My hat's right here," he said and turned around, but of course there was no hat on the bench. "Where is it? Where's my hat?" he sounded very cross.

I backed off a few steps. "Here. Here it is. Can't you see?"

I thought he was choking. "Why are you poking that sopping rag at me? I had a brand-new hat. Where is it? Answer me!"

"The wind blew it away. It fell into the pond and I fished it out for you. Then we wrung it out. Here take it. And here's the lining."

"I'm going to speak to your parents!"

"Mommy's at college and Daddy's at the plant. Are you Mikhail Botvinnik?"

He really looked mad. "Go away, child! Go far away! I'm warning you!"

I backed off some more and said, "How about a game of chess?"

Then he had a real good look at me. "Can you play?"

"Sure!"

He sighed and said, "All right. Sit down."

INDEPENDENT GORBUSHKIN

Two weeks ago there was a great commotion at school, because a famous writer was coming to visit us. We'd read his funny stories and poems aloud in class and liked them, because they were so funny. When Raisa Ivanovna said he was coming to visit us next Friday we all clapped and shouted, but she said,

"Be quiet, everyone! You're not in the circus. You're in school. Let's think of a good way to welcome him. Think hard. Let's see who'll come up with the best idea."

Everybody raised his hand. Everybody had a great idea. We were all shouting at once:

"We'll get him flowers."

"We'll make him an honorary Young Pioneer."

"Let's make him pin cushions."

"Let's have a class picture taken with him in the middle."

"No! Let's have a party!"

"Franks and bread and butter, and tea."

"I know! We all cheer when he comes in."

"Right! And a pop-gun salute. A hundred-and-one salvoes!"

"The door opens and we fire away!"

"It'll be better than fireworks."

"It'll be terrific!"

"Let's make him a pin cushion anyway."

"What'll he do with a pin cushion? Think he's crazy or something?"

"Nobody asked you!"

"Let's give him my cat. He weighs six kilos."

"Give your cat to somebody else."

"Nobody wants him."

"Let's give him a pin cushion."

"Tanya! Nobody wants a pin cushion!"

"We'll cheer and toss him into the air."

"What if he's heavy?"

"We'll ask the eighth grade to help."

This went on for quite some time.

"All right," Raisa Ivanovna said. "First, we'll present him with a bouquet of flowers. We'll greet him with applause. Then we'll ask him to read one of his stories. Then we'll elect him an honorary Young Pioneer, and one of you will knot a Young Pioneer tie around his neck. Then, perhaps, we'll have our picture taken together. That's about all. It'll be modest and just right. Do you agree?"

"It sounds great."

Then Petya Gorbushkin stood up and raised his hand, but Raisa Ivanovna didn't notice him, because he's so small and as roly-poly as a hedgehog. There was such a commotion that you couldn't see him at all.

So I said, "Petya Gorbushkin wants to say something, Raisa Ivanovna."

"All right, Petya. What is it?"

He opened his mouth and a sort of sing-song came out, like this:

"We-we-we." He must've been pretty excited, because he was stuttering so we all waited till he got over it.

Actually, he only stutters on very important occasions, when he's very excited. Otherwise, he speaks very clearly and loudly and is a fine fellow. Nobody can draw horses like Petya. And he always shares his lunch. We're so used to him we never make fun of the way he sometimes stutters and that's why he nearly never does, because we don't. But now he'd begun again, so we were waiting patiently, because we wanted to know what he was going to say. Sure enough, he finally said it.

"We-we-we sh-sh-sh-should a-a-ask him for his autograph."

"Good for you! That's a great idea!" I said.

Then we settled back to wait till Friday and the writer's visit. Some of the kids were learning his poems by heart. Tanya went ahead and made an embroidered pin cushion for him anyway, but most of us were just waiting. The days rolled on, one after another, and then all of a sudden it was that very special Friday.

We were all combed and brushed and shining. We all had on clean white shirts and blouses and bright red ties. I was really amazed to see that so much cleanliness made us look beautiful. Even the girls. Somehow, though, we didn't look like ourselves. Even the classroom seemed brighter and cleaner, and there was a bouquet of flowers on the teacher's desk.

The door opened and the famous writer entered. He was very tall, but that was about all that made him look different. Otherwise, he was very ordinary-looking. Most important, he didn't look at all important. When he entered we all rose to greet him. He went over to Raisa Ivanovna's desk and she said,

"Today, children, Ivan Vladislavovich, your favorite author, has come to visit us."

We all began clapping like mad. He smiled. That made him look very kind. So we clapped still louder and began shouting. Some of the kids even began jumping up and down, and others began trying to calm them with real hefty shoves, but they didn't want to be calmed and put up a good fight. I gave Lenny a good crack on the head, and he got me right under the ribs. On the whole, it was a small-sized free-for-all.

After Raisa Ivanovna slapped her desk loudly we began cooling off some. When things became quiet at last the writer gripped the desk, leaned forward and said,

"H-h-hel-lochi-chi..."

We were stunned. What was wrong? Did he stutter? We hadn't known. It was so unexpected. No one had warned us, and so our class dunce, Tanya Puzyrkova who sat in the back row, giggled in her stupid voice. Then the writer turned pink and spoke in Tanya's direction, but all his words came out clear and normal, "I wanted to tell you, children, that when I get excited, or if I'm very touched, I begin to stutter a bit. If anyone finds this really funny he can leave. I won't feel hurt at all."

That took care of her, but good. She pouted, got all red and stared at her desk. That's when I got up and said,

"Don't pay any attention to her, Ivan Vladislavovich, because she's dope. Don't feel shy. Go ahead and stutter as much as you like. Make yourself at home."

Everybody clapped again. The writer smiled and looked still friendlier than before. Then he recited some of his poems we all liked so much and told us some funny stories. He was really good, much better than any actor, and we were laughing our heads off. It was all so interesting, because he'd made them all up himself, and here he was in person, talking to us now, and it was all for real! He was sitting in front of us and smiling. We could even touch him if we wanted to, to see if he was real, and he wouldn't get mad at us, because kind-hearted people never get mad at children. He went on telling us stories. I was so happy I could cry. This went on and on, probably for over an hour. I could've sat there listening to him till midnight, but some of the other kids started raising their hands to ask to be excused. That's when he stopped and said,

"Well, children, I believe it's time for us to close. I wish you all the best of everything and hope we'll always be friends. What d'you say?"

Naturally, we all yelled and howled. Then Masha went over to him and tied a red tie around his neck and we all yelled:

"Thank you! Thank you!"

Then one of the other girls handed him a bouquet of flowers and got up her courage and kissed him on the ear. His eyes got red and he waved his hand for silence and said, "I... I... I..."

And we understood he was very touched and very excited. So we all shut up so's to hear what he'd say. That's when Petya Gorbushkin got up. He held out a book and said, "I... I... I..." He was probably very excited, too. The writer sort of glanced at him. He was trying to calm down and tell us something, but couldn't, no matter how he tried. That's why all he could say was: "I.. I...." again.

Petya Gorbushkin was keeping up with him, saying, "I..." Then the writer got mad. "Don't mimic me. That's not nice at all," he said, turned back to us and again all he said was, "I... I..."

But Petya said quickly, so's not to stutter. "I'm notmimicking-youatall." He held out the book to the writer and said in an awfully pitiful voice, "I... I... I..."

The writer looked so mad I thought he'd murder Gorbushkin.

"Why're you stuttering then? I'm the one who has a stutter, not you. So don't confuse things!" Then, for the third time, he turned back to us and said, "I... I... I..."

Then Gorbushkin rattled off in a desperate voice, "I stutter, too. Even worse than you do. I... I... I..."

I decided that if I didn't step in right then and there it might end in a fight, so I jumped up and said, "This is Gorbushkin, Ivan Vladislavovich. He's not mimicking you. He stutters, too. But he stutters on his own. It has nothing to do with you. You just happen to be stuttering together now. Actually, though, you each do your own stuttering. Gorbushkin! What'd you want to say? Calm down! Get a grip on yourself! You've got to try!"

Gorbushkin tried hard and got a grip on himself. "I... w-wanted toaskyoutoautographyourbookformeplease!"

"See how easy it is?" I said. "Good for you, Gorbushkin. That's what he wanted to say, Ivan Vladislavovich. He's a real friend and stutters independently."



Then the writer laughed and said, "All right, let's have your book."

This is what he wrote on the flyleaf:

"To independent Gorbushkin, with very best wishes."

Then he stood up and said very softly, "I... I... I... want to say that I like you all immensely!"

And he left.

THE PETS' CORNER

Just before the lesson ended Raisa Ivanovna said, "I have good news for you, children. The School Council decided to set up a pets' corner, a little Zoo, in school. You'll take care of the animals yourselves and will study their behavior."

I was so excited I nearly jumped out of my seat. "Where's it going to be?"

"On the third floor, next to the teachers' room."

"How'll we ever get the bison up to the third floor?"

"Which bison?"

"A shaggy one. With big horns and a long tail."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Dennis, but there won't be any bison. We're going to keep hedgehogs, birds, fishes and white mice. Each of you can bring one of these to school to start our pets' corner. That will be all for today."

As I walked home I kept thinking about how nice it would be if the school had an elk, a yak, or at least a hippo, because they were all such wonderful animals. When I got home I saw Misha running across the yard and shouting, "They're selling white mice in the pet shop on Arbat Street!"

This was good news. I ran straight upstairs.

"Happy days, Mommy! They're selling white mice on Arbat Street!"

"White mice? On Arbat Street? So what?"

"They're selling mice in the pet shop! For school! So please give me some money."

Mommy went for her purse. "Why d'you need white mice for school? Won't little gray ones do just as well?"

"Can't you understand? Gray mice are just ordinary mice, but white mice are specially made. Understand?"

Mommy gave me some money and I ran out.

The pet shop was crowded. I might've known, because there's not a person in the world who doesn't want to own a white mouse. That's why there was such a crush. Misha was standing by the counter to see that nobody got through out of turn. Still, I was out of luck. The last mouse was sold just as I was getting close to the counter.

"When will you have some more mice?" I asked the clerk.

"When we get another shipment. Towards the end of the year probably."

"Mice are something everybody needs. You should always have them on sale," I said.



I must've begun losing weight from unhappiness right away, because when Mommy saw me she gasped.

"Don't let those mice upset you so, Dennis. We'll do without them. Let's go and buy you a fish. A fish is just what a first-grader needs. What kind of fish would you like?"

"A Nile crocodile!"

"How about something smaller?"

"Then a tropical fish. They're very small."

Mommy and I went back to the pet shop.

"How much are these tropical fish?" she asked. "I'd like a dozen of these for the school pets' corner."

"A rouble-fifty each," the clerk said.

"Why, that's ridiculous!" Mommy said. "Let's go home, Dennis."

"What about the fish, Mommy?"

"Not these. Let's go home. They're terrible fish. They bite."

What can I take to school? The pet shop is all out of white mice and the fish bite.
How can I be happy?"

WHAT MISHA LIKES

One day Misha and I went to the room where we have our singing lessons. Boris Sergeyevich was at the piano, playing softly. Misha and I sat down on the windowsill, so's not to bother him, but he didn't notice us anyway. He went on playing. All kinds of musical sounds kept slipping out from under his fingers, splashing all over and making the whole thing sound warm and sunny. I liked what he was playing and could've just sat there listening to him, but he soon stopped playing. He put down the top of the piano, saw us, smiled and said,

"Ah, look who's here? You look like two sparrows perched on a twig. Well, what's new?"

"What was that you were playing, Boris Sergeyevich?" I asked.

"Chopin. I like his music very much."

"That's because you're our singing teacher. That's why you like all kinds of songs."

"That wasn't a song. I like songs, too, but that was not a song. The piece I was playing goes by a much greater name."

"What's that?"

"Mu-sic. Chopin was a great composer. He wrote wonderful music. And music is something I love more than anything else on earth." He looked at me closely and said, "Now you tell me what you like. Best of all."

"I like a lot of things."

I told him about all the things I like: dogs, sawing wood, baby elephants, red cavalrymen, the little antelope with pink hooves, ancient warriors, cool stars, horses' faces and a lot more.

He listened and looked very serious. Then he said, "Indeed! I never knew. Actually, you're still a very small boy, but you like so many things. Why, I'd say it was the entire world!"

Then Misha butted in. He pouted and said, "I like still more things than Dennis does!"

Boris Sergeyevich laughed. "You don't say? Well, now it's your turn. You tell me about all the things you like."

Misha fidgeted on the windowsill, cleared his throat and said,

"I like buns, rolls, cakes and pies. I like bread, pastries, gingerbread and poppy-seed cakes. Crackers and biscuits, meat pies, fruit pies, cabbage rolls and rice rolls. I like cheesecake buns, especially if they're fresh, but stale ones are all right, too. I like oatmeal cookies and vanilla wafers.

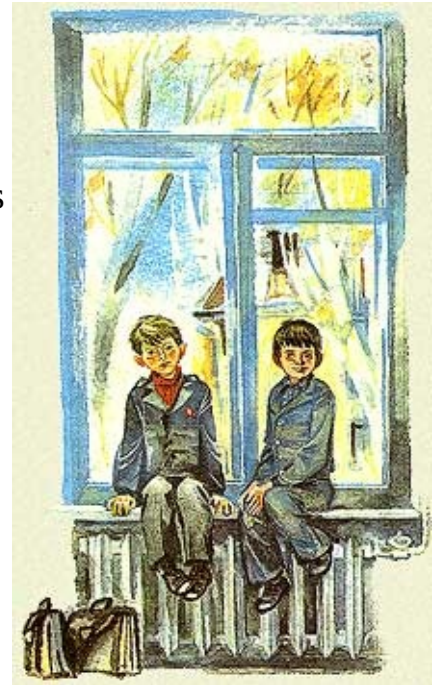
"I like anchovies, salmon, pickled pike, catfish in tomato sauce, sardines, eggplant sauce, fried squash and fried potatoes.

"I love bologna and can eat a whole kilo of it, and all kinds of salamies, hard and soft. I like buttered noodles and elbow macaroni, and spaghetti, and cheese that has holes in it and cheese that doesn't, and cheese with a yellow rind, and cheese with a red rind.

"I like cottage cheese patties, and just plain cottage cheese, salted or sweetened. I like grated apples with sugar and just plain apples, and if they're peeled, then I like to eat the apple first and then the peel.

"I like fried liver, meatballs, herring, split-pea soup, green peas, boiled meat, caramels, sugar, tea, jam, soda pop, seltzer, boiled eggs, hard-boiled eggs and even raw eggs. I like sandwiches with all kinds of fillings, especially if you put a big layer of mashed potatoes on the bread. There... Then there's halvah. I know everybody loves it as much as I do. I also like roast duck, roast goose and roast turkey. Oh, yes! I'm crazy about ice cream I like every single kind of ice cream that was ever invented."

Misha looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath. He looked tired. But Boris Sergeyevich was staring at him and so he continued in a mumble, "Gooseberries, carrots, smoked salmon, turnips, borshch, meat pies, though I



already said meat pies, broth, bananas, persimmons, stewed fruit, frankfurters, salami, though I already said salami..."

Misha's motor ran down and he stopped. You could see he was waiting for Boris Sergeyevich to say something nice, but Boris Sergeyevich looked sort of angry. He seemed to be waiting for Misha to go on, but Misha didn't. So they both just stared at each other, and each one was waiting for the other to say something.

Finally, Boris Sergeyevich said, "Well, Misha, I can see there's a lot that you like, but everything you like is all in the same category: it's all edible. So it seems you like a whole supermarket full of food and nothing else. But what about people? Whom do you love? Or, perhaps, some animal?"

Misha looked embarrassed. "Oh, I nearly forgot!" he said. "I also like kittens. And Grandma!"

ONE DROP WILL KILL A HORSE

When Daddy got sick the doctor called and said, "It's nothing to worry about, just a touch of the flu, but I'd suggest you stop smoking. You've a slight heart murmur."

After he was gone Mommy said, "It's so silly to make yourself sick by smoking those awful cigarettes. You're still a young man, but your heart's wheezing."

"You're exaggerating," Daddy said. "There's no wheezing at all. It's just a very small murmur. That doesn't count."

"Yes, it does! Naturally, you'd be happier if you had a great crashing and clanging. I know you."

"At any rate, I don't need a droning," Daddy interrupted.

"I'm not droning. But smoking is harmful. I'm sure you know that one drop of nicotine will kill a horse."

Now that was something! I looked at Daddy. He was a big man,

no doubt about it, but still, he was smaller than a horse. He was bigger than Mommy and me, but no matter which way you looked at it, he was smaller than a horse, and even smaller than the scrawniest cow. A cow'd never fit on our couch, but Daddy could, with room to spare. I was scared. I didn't want him to be killed by a drop of nicotine. Never. Just thinking about it kept me awake. I couldn't fall asleep for so long that I didn't notice when I finally did drop off.

Daddy was fine again by Saturday, and we had company: Uncle Yura and Aunt Katya, Boris Mikhailovich and Aunt Tamara. They all were very polite. As soon as Aunt Tamara came in she began chattering and twittering. She sat beside Daddy when we had tea and kept fussing over him, asking him whether he was comfortable enough and wasn't he sitting in a draft, and finally fussed so much that she dumped three spoons of sugar in his tea without noticing what she was doing. Daddy took a sip and made a face.



"I added sugar to his tea," Mommy said and her eyes got as green as gooseberries. Aunt Tamara began laughing loudly. She laughed so you'd think someone was snapping at her heels under the table. Daddy pushed his cup of sugary tea aside. Then Aunt Tamara took a very slim cigarette case from her purse and gave it to Daddy, saying, "This is to make up for your ruined tea. Every time you light a cigarette you'll recall this funny happening and the culprit."

I was boiling mad. Why was she reminding Daddy about smoking? He'd nearly stopped while he was sick. After all, one drop of cigarette poison could kill a horse! And there she was, making him smoke again. So I said,

"You're a stupid fool, Aunt Tamara! I hope you drop dead! Get out of our house! Don't you ever set your fat foot in my house again!" Naturally, I had to say all this to myself, so that no one heard me.

Daddy was holding the cigarette case. "Thank you, Tamara. I'm very touched. But I smoke long cigarettes and they won't fit into this little case. I smoke Kazbek. However..."

Daddy looked at me. "Instead of drinking so much tea before bedtime, Dennis, go get me the box of Kazbek in my desk drawer. Take the scissors and cut off some of the rolled cardboard holders so they'll fit into the cigarette case."

I went over to his desk, found the box of cigarettes and the scissors, held a cigarette up to the case for size and shortened them. Then I filled the case and

took it to him.

Daddy opened it, looked at my work, then at me and burst out laughing. "Look at what my smart boy has done," he said.

Everyone reached for the case. They all began to laugh. Naturally, Aunt Tamara tried the hardest. She wasn't really laughing, she was grunting and snorting, so that first the tea dribbled down out of her mouth and then half a pastry, two candies and her front tooth. But she snatched it up and stuck it back in again, as if nothing had happened. Then she stopped laughing, crooked her fingers and rapped her knuckles on my head, saying, "How'd you ever think of leaving the empty holders and cutting off most of the tobacco? It's the tobacco that people smoke, and you've gone and cut it all off! What d'you have in your head, sawdust?"

"Your head's full of sawdust, dope Tamara!" I said, though, naturally, I said it to myself, because Mommy'd have scolded me otherwise. Even so, there was a funny look in Mommy's eye as she stared at me.

"Come over here," Mommy said and tilted up my chin. "Look at me."

I looked at her and felt my cheeks getting red.

"Did you do it on purpose?"

I couldn't fool her. "Yes."

"Then you'd better leave the room," Daddy said, "if somebody I know doesn't want to get a spanking."

I could see he hadn't understood a thing, but I didn't bother to explain. I simply left the room.

Imagine: one drop will kill a horse!

20 YEARS UNDER THE BED

I'll never forget that winter evening. It was cold, snowing and windy and so dreary I felt like howling, especially after Mommy and Daddy went to the movies.

When Misha telephoned from upstairs and invited me over I rushed right up. His house was bright and cheerful, and there was quite a crowd. Lena was there, and Kostya, and Andrei. We played all the games we knew and laughed a lot and made a lot of noise.

"Let's play hide-and-seek!" Lena said.

That was a good idea. It was a swell game, because Misha and I kept peeking, so the little kids were always "it" and we could keep on hiding. But we soon got bored playing in Misha's room. It's small and we could only hide behind the drapes, the wardrobe or the chest. We started edging out of his room and into the large, long corridor.

It was more fun to play there, because there were coat racks outside the door with coats hanging on them. Whoever was "it" would never guess I was hiding behind a fur coat, standing in somebody's felt boots that were set under the coat.

When Kostya was "it" he turned to the wall, counted loudly and said, "Here I come, ready or not!" Everyone scattered. Kostya waited a few seconds and shouted again, "Here I come, ready or not!"

This was a sort of second warning. Misha climbed onto the windowsill, Lena hid behind the wardrobe and Andrei and I slipped out of the room and into the corridor. Andrei darted right under the fur coat I had hidden behind before, so I had no place to hide. Just as I was about to sock Andrei and make him move, Kostya shouted a third and last time,

"Here I come, ready or not!"

If I didn't want him to spot me I'd have to be quick. Just in the nick of time I saw an open door and dashed inside.



It was a room I'd never seen. There was a big, high bed near the far wall, and I darted under it. It was nice and gloomy under the bed. There were quite a few things there. First of all, there were a lot of shoes. There was also a flat wooden box and a tin trough set upside-down on the box. I made myself comfortable, with my head resting on the trough and my shoulders leaning against the box. As I lay there, looking at the shoes, I kept congratulating myself on having found such a good hiding place. I was thinking of the fun we'd have when Kostya finally found me.

I moved a corner of the spread which reached down to the floor and was blocking my view of the room, because I wanted to see the door when Kostya'd come looking for me. Soon somebody did come in, but it wasn't Kostya. It was Efrosinya Petrovna, a nice old lady who looked a little bit like a witch.

Boy, would she laugh when she saw Kostya pulling me out! To make things still funnier, I'd put one of her shoes on my head. I had a big grin on my face, because I knew Kostya'd find me in another minute or so.

But Efrosinya Petrovna shut the door and turned the key. Imagine! She'd locked it! She'd locked herself in, and me, too!

Everything suddenly became very quiet. I decided she'd only locked it for a second, and that she'd unlock it again in a minute and everything'd be just as I thought it would. Everyone'd laugh, and Kostya'd be happy, because he'd've found me in such a funny place. I kept looking at Efrosinya Petrovna to see what

she'd do.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, making the springs creak on top of me. All I could see now were her legs. She took off her slippers and padded over to the door in her stockinged feet. At last! She'd gone to unlock it.

I was badly mistaken. *Click!* went the light switch. She'd turned off the light. The springs creaked again. The room was pitch dark. Efrosinya Petrovna was lying in bed, never guessing that I was under it. What a mess! I was locked in. I was trapped.

How long would I have to lie there? I'd be lucky if it'd only be for an hour or so. What if it'd be till morning? And how would I get out in the morning? If I didn't come home my parents would call the militia. They'd come with a dog. A German shepherd. But what if there weren't any dogs in our precinct? What if the militia didn't find me? What if Efrosinya Petrovna slept through the night and then went off for the day and locked me in again? Then what? Naturally, I'd have to eat some of the food in her cupboard. Then, when she returned, I'd have to hide under the bed again, because I'd eaten her food and she'd take me to court. I'd just have to go on living under her bed to avoid disgrace.

The one nice thing about it all was that I wouldn't have to go to school any more, what with staying under the bed, but then what about my matriculation certificate? I'd not only be grown after twenty years under the bed, I'd probably be overgrown.

This made me so mad I hit the trough I'd been resting my head on. It made a loud boom. The sound seemed twenty times louder in the dark. I was deafened by it. My heart froze.

Efrosinya Petrovna was awakened by the noise. She'd probably been sleeping peacefully before the terrible boom from under the bed. She lay there for a few minutes, breathing fast, and then cried out in a faint voice, "He-e-elp?" It sounded like a question.

I wanted to say, "Take it easy, Efrosinya Petrovna. Go back to sleep. It's just me, Dennis." But instead, I suddenly sneezed louder than ever before, with two little sneezes at the end of the big one: "Ah-choo! Choo! Choo!"

I'd probably breathed in some dust. My sneezing made her think something

terrible was happening under the bed. She sounded really scared, and this time she shouted at the top of her voice, and there was no question in it this time,

"Help!"

For some reason or other I suddenly sneezed again. Real loud. There was even a sort of howling sound to it, like this, "Ahhh-choo!"

She shouted more faintly, "Robbers!" Then she probably decided there couldn't be any robbers under the bed. But what if there were? And she yelled, "Help! Murder!"

What a lie! Nobody was murdering her. And what with? And what for? It wasn't nice of her to scream lies into the night. So I decided that since she wasn't sleeping anyway, it was time for me to get out from under the bed.

I couldn't see in the dark and I made a terrible racket knocking against the trough and the box.

By then Efrosinya Petrovna was probably going a little crazy from fright, because she was shouting words like "Melp! Hurder!"

I scrambled out from under the bed at last, and felt along the wall for the light switch. Instead, I found the key in the door. What luck! I turned it, opened the door and walked out. Something flapped against my face and then fell on top of me. I was standing in the closet.

Efrosinya Petrovna was making croaking noises by now. I was too stunned to say anything. Then someone began knocking on the real door.

"Hey, Dennis! Come on out! Efrosinya Petrovna! Tell Dennis to come out. His daddy's come for him!"

And then there was Daddy, saying, "Pardon me, but is my son in here?"

Then the light went on and the door opened. Everyone tumbled into the room. The kids dashed in, looking for me. When I walked out of the closet there were two hats on my head and three dresses draped over my shoulders.

"What's all this?" Daddy wanted to know.

"Come on, tell us!" Kostya and Misha chimed in.

I didn't say a word. I had a funny feeling that I really had spent twenty years under the bed.



GIRL ON A BALL

1. Red Balloon in a Blue Sky
2. "It's Alive and It Shines"
3. The Ancient Mariner
4. Watermelon Lane
5. The Blue Dagger
6. The Man With the Blue Face
7. Heavy Traffic on Sadovaya Street
8. The Wheels Go Clatter-Clatter
9. Masons Hammer at Stones
10. A Childhood Friend
11. My Sister Xenia
12. A Girl on a Ball



RED BALLOON IN A BLUE SKY

The door opened, and there was Lena shouting from the hall, "There's a spring bazaar at the department store!" She was shouting very loudly, and her eyes were as big and round as buttons. "Come on, Dennis! Hurry! They're selling kvas from a barrel! There's a band and everything! Come on!"

You'd think the house was on fire. But I got all excited, too, and in no time we were out on the street. We took hands and ran towards the department store. There was a big crowd there. We saw two huge shiny figures of a man and a woman, in the middle of the crowd. They weren't live, but they blinked their eyes and moved their lips as if they were speaking. The man-figure boomed, "Spring bazaarr! Spring bazaarr!"

The woman-figure kept saying, "Welcome! Welcome!"

We stared at them for a long time.

"How can they talk like that if they're not real?" Lena said.

"I don't know."

"I do. It's not them at all. There are live actors inside of them, and they're shouting and pulling wires to make the dummies move their lips."

That made me laugh. "That goes to show you're still a baby. What actor would ever want to sit all scrunched up inside a big doll all day? Hm? All bent over double. And what about eating and drinking? You really are a baby. They have radios inside, that's what's doing the talking."

"Oh, you think you're so smart!"

We pushed through the crowd. A band was playing. Everyone looked happy. A man was selling lottery tickets. He had a clear plastic revolving box with the lottery tickets inside and he kept turning the box as he called on everyone to come right up and try their luck. We stood listening and watching him for a while. Then Lena said,

"When it's alive and shouts it's much more fun."

We were having a great time.



Then an officer came up and lifted Lena up and his friend pressed a button in the wall and some perfume sprayed out on her. When the man put her down again she smelled like candy and he said,

"What a darling little girl you are."

She ran off and I followed her. We finally found the kvas barrel. I had my lunch money so we each had a big mug of kvas. Lena's stomach looked like a balloon, and my nose felt all prickly inside. It was really terrific. Then, when we ran on, I could feel the kvas slopping around inside of me. After a while we decided to go home. It was just as nice outside, where a woman was selling balloons.

The minute Lena saw her she stopped and said, "Oh, I want a balloon."

"That'd be nice, except I have no money left."

"I have a coin."

"Show it to me."

She took it from her pocket.

"Oho! That's ten kopecks. She'd like a balloon, please," I said to the lady.

She smiled at us. "What color d'you want? Red, green or blue?"

Lena chose a red balloon. Then we started back home.

"You can fly it for a while if you want to," she said and handed me the string.

The minute the end of the string was in my hand I felt the balloon tugging at my fingers. It probably wanted to fly away. I let the string out a little and felt it pulling harder. It was begging me to let it fly away. I was so sorry for a balloon that could fly but was tied to me that I let it go. At first, it didn't move. You'd think it couldn't believe it was free. But then, when it did, it soared up higher than the lamp post.

"Look what you've done! Catch it!" Lena cried and began jumping up and down. When she saw she couldn't reach it she burst into tears. "Why'd you let it go?"

I didn't say anything. I was looking up at the balloon. It was floating higher and higher, as if it'd been dreaming of doing this all its life.

I stood there, looking up at the sky. Lena was looking up, too. Some grownups stopped to watch it floating higher and higher and getting smaller and smaller.

The balloon was flying past the top floor of a very tall apartment building. Someone leaned out of the window and waved to it, but it flew on, higher than the TV antennas, higher than a flock of pigeons, and became very small. It flew behind a little cloud that was as small and as fluffy as a rabbit. Then it floated out and finally disappeared. It had probably reached the stratosphere and was floating by the Moon now, but still, we kept looking up at the sky. After a while I began to see dots and circles. The balloon was gone. Lena sighed. The grownups walked on, wherever they were going.

We did, too. We didn't speak. I kept thinking about how beautiful springtime was, when everyone was dressed in nice bright clothes and looked so cheerful, when the militiamen had on white gloves and a red balloon was floating away into the blue sky. I was sorry I couldn't tell all this to Lena, but even if I could she wouldn't've understood, because she's still so little.

We didn't say a word till we reached our house. When we stopped to say goodbye Lena said,

"If I had some more money, I'd buy another balloon. So you could let it fly away."



IT'S ALIVE AND IT SHINES

One evening I was sitting by the sandbox in our yard, waiting for Mommy to come home. She was probably still at college, or maybe she'd gone to the store, or maybe she was having a long wait for the bus. I don't know what was keeping her. All the other parents of children who lived in our house had come home, and the children had gone off with them and were probably having tea and bread rings and cheese by now, but my Mommy wasn't home yet.

The lights were beginning to go on in the windows, and dark clouds that looked like bearded old men were clumping across the sky.

I was awfully hungry. I said to myself that if I'd known my Mommy was hungry and was waiting for me someplace far away, I'd run straight to her and wouldn't be late, and she wouldn't have to sit by the sandbox and not know what to do.

Just then Misha came out into the yard. "Hello," he said.

"Hello."

Misha sat down beside me and picked up my dumptruck. "Hey! Where'd you get it? Does it pick up a load of sand by itself? Does it? Can it dump it by itself?"

"Yes."

"What's the handle for? Does it turn? Huh? Does it? Hey! Can I borrow it?"

"No. It's a present. Daddy gave it to me before he left on his trip."

Misha pouted and moved away. It was getting darker. I was staring at the gate, because I didn't want to miss Mommy, but she wasn't anywhere in sight. She must've met Aunt Rita on the way and they were probably standing someplace and yakking and not even thinking about me. I stretched out on the sand.

Then Misha said, "Won't you lend me your dumptruck?"

"Oh, shut up."

"I'll give you three stamps for it: one Guatemala and two Barbados."

"How can you compare Barbados to a dumptruck?"

"Want my life preserver?"

"It leaks."

"You can paste the hole up."

That made me mad. "And where'll I swim? In the bathtub?"

Misha pouted again. "All right, if you're so stingy, here!" He handed me a matchbox.

"Go on, open it! You'll see."

I opened the box but didn't see a thing at first. Then I saw a tiny pale-green light. It was like a star blinking very far away.

"What is it?" I whispered.

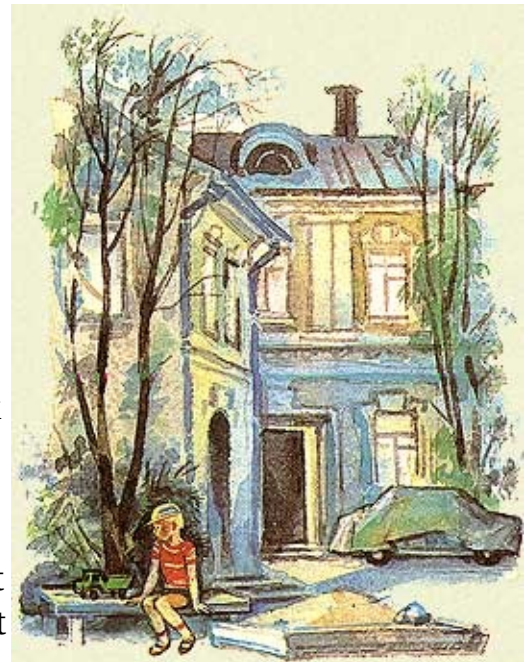
"It's a glow-worm. Like it? And it's alive. It really is."

"You know what? You can have my dumptruck for keeps. I'll trade it for your light."

Misha snatched my dumptruck and ran home. I just sat there looking at my little glow-worm. It was as green as a fairy light, and even though it was right there in my hand it seemed miles away. My heart was beating real fast, and I had funny, prickly feeling in my nose like I wanted to cry.

I sat there looking at it. There wasn't anybody else in the yard. I don't know how much time passed. All of a sudden I looked up and there was Mommy. I was so glad to see her. When we were upstairs and sitting at the table having tea and bread rings and cheese, Mommy said, "How's your new dumptruck?"

"I traded it." "You did? What for?"



"For a glow-worm! See? Here it is, in the matchbox. Turn off the light."

Mommy turned off the light. The room became very dark. We both stared at the pale-green star. Then Mommy turned the light back on again. "It really is like magic. But how could you've traded your new dumptruck for a little worm?"

"I was waiting for you, and waiting, and I was so sad. The glowworm's better than a dumptruck."

"In what way?"

"Can't you see? It's alive. And it shines."

THE ANCIENT MARINER

Maria Petrovna often comes to have tea with us. She's very plump. Her dresses are pulled tight over her body, like a pillow-case on a pillow. She always wears dangling earrings and she uses perfume that's icky-sweet. The smell of it chokes me.

Whenever she sees me she always asks me what I want to be when I grow up and who my girlfriend is. Well, I don't have one! I've told her so about five times, but she keeps asking me the same old stupid questions. She's funny. It was spring when she first came to visit. The trees were all green, and everything smelled of grass and leaves, and even though it was evening it was still light. Mommy sent me off to bed, but I made a fuss and Maria Petrovna said,

"Be a good boy and go to bed. Then next Sunday I'll take you to my cottage on the river bank. We'll go there by electric train. There's a dog there, and the three of us will go rowing."

I went straight to bed, pulled the covers up over my head and began thinking of next Sunday and going to the country. I'd run barefoot in the grass and maybe she'd even let me row. The oarlocks would creak, the water would gurgle and drops as clear as glass would fall back into the water. I'd make friends with the dog and would look into its brown eyes and touch its beautiful tongue when it lolled out from the heat.

I lay there thinking and listening to Maria Petrovna laughing until I fell asleep. All that week I kept thinking about the same things when I went to bed. On Saturday night I shined my shoes, and sharpened my penknife on the edge of the stove, because I might find a very nice stick to whittle. On Sunday morning I got up before anyone else did, got dressed and began waiting for Maria Petrovna. After Daddy had his breakfast and read the paper he said,

"Come on, Dennis. Let's go for a walk."

"I can't, Daddy. Maria Petrovna's coming. She's going to call for me and we're going to her cottage. There's a dog there and a row-boat. I'll wait for her."

Daddy didn't say anything. He looked at Mommy, shrugged and had another

glass of tea. I finished my breakfast in a hurry and went outside so's I'd be there the minute she turned up. I kept walking up and down for a long time, waiting for her. After a while Misha came over and said,

"Let's go up to the attic and see if the pigeon eggs've hatched."

"I can't. Not now. I'm going to the country for the day. There's a dog there and a rowboat. My mommy's friend is coming for me, and we're going to go by electric train."

"Gee! Can I go, too?"

I was glad Misha wanted to go. After all, it'd be more fun with him there than just me and Maria Petrovna.

"Sure you can. Maria Petrovna's very nice. She'll be glad to take you, too."

We both started waiting for her. We went out through the gate and stood on the pavement, waiting. Every time we saw a lady Misha'd ask,

"Is that her?" A minute later he'd say, "Is that one her?"

But none of them were. We were hot and soon got bored. After a while we got tired of waiting.

"I'm not going to wait any more!" Misha said and left.

But I kept on waiting. I waited till lunchtime. During lunch Daddy said,

"Well? D'you want to go for a walk? If you don't, Mommy will go with me."

"I'll wait. I told her I'd wait for her. I know she'll come."

But she didn't. That day I didn't go for a walk with Daddy, and I didn't go to see if the pigeon eggs had hatched, and when Daddy came home he told me not to stand by the gate. As we walked towards the house he put his arm around me



and said,

"You'll have all of that ahead of you: grass, the river, rowboats and a dog. So don't look so unhappy."

When I went to bed that night I started thinking about the country, the rowboat and the dog, but now I pictured Misha there with me, or Daddy, or Misha and Mommy, but not Maria Petrovna.

Time marched on. I'd really forgotten all about Maria Petrovna when one day the door opened and there she was. Her dangling earrings went tinkle-tinkle, and she and Mommy went smack-smack, and the whole place was full of that icky-sweet smell. Everybody sat down to have tea except me. I was hiding behind the wardrobe, because I was mad at Maria Petrovna. She sat there at the table, enjoying herself. Imagine! When she'd finished her tea she got up and peeked behind the wardrobe. She cupped her hand under my chin and said,

"Why so gloomy?"

"I am not."

"Come on out."

"I like it here."

Then she burst out laughing, and everything on her jingled.

When she was all through laughing she said, "Guess what I have for you?"

"I don't want anything."

"Not even a sword?"

"What kind of a sword?"

"A real one."

That was really something!

"D'you have one?"

"Yes."

"Don't you need it?"

"What for? I'm a woman and women don't need swords. I'd rather give it to you."

You could see she wasn't a bit sorry about giving it away. I even began to think she was nice after all.

"When'll you give it to me?"

"Why, tomorrow. Tomorrow when you come home from school. Tomorrow the sword'll be here. I'll put it on your bed."

"All right," I said and came out from behind the wardrobe. I took my seat at the table and had tea with them and saw her to the door when she left.

The next day I had a hard time waiting for school to be out. When it finally was I dashed home as fast as I could. I kept waving my arm as I ran, because I was pretending I had a sword and was slashing away at the nazis and defending black children in Africa. I was running fast, because there was a sword waiting for me at home, a real cavalryman's sword. In case of trouble I could be a volunteer, and they'd take me, because I had a sword. Then I'd go to Cuba and Fidel Castro and I'd have our pictures taken together. I'd have my sword and he'd have his beard.

I ran into my room and over to my bed. There was no sword on it. I looked under the pillow, felt around under the bed. There was no sword. None at all. Maria Petrovna had fooled me. There was no sword and there wouldn't be any. I went to the window.

"She may still come," Mommy said.

"No, she won't. I knew she wouldn't anyway."

"Then why'd you look under the bed?"

"I just wondered whether she was here or not. Understand? Maybe she was. This time."

"Yes, I see. Go and have something to eat," Mommy said and came over to stand

beside me.

After I'd eaten I went to the window again. I didn't feel like going outside to play.

When Daddy came home Mommy told him about what had happened. He called me over, took a book off the shelf and said,

"Let's read a wonderful book about a dog. The name of the book is 'Michael, Brother of Jerry'. It's by Jack London."

I sat down beside him and he began to read to me. He really reads wonderfully. Besides, it was a terrific book. I'd never heard anything like it before. It was all about a dog. A steward stole it and they set off together to hunt for treasure. The ship they sailed on belonged to three rich men. The Ancient Mariner, a sick and lonely old man, told them he knew where a great treasure was hidden away and promised each of them a pile of diamonds. In return, they'd give him food and lodgings. On the way they discovered the ship couldn't reach the treasure, because they were short of water. The Ancient Mariner had tricked them, so they had to turn back. He'd tricked them because he didn't want to die of starvation.

We finished reading and began talking about what we'd read. Daddy suddenly laughed and said,

"That Ancient Mariner was really something! Why, he was just a trickster like Maria Petrovna."

"He was not! He wasn't at all like her. He tricked them so's he wouldn't die of starvation, 'cause he was sick and all alone in the world, but Maria Petrovna isn't sick, is she?"

"No. She's quite healthy."

"See what I mean? If the Ancient Mariner hadn't lied he'd have died between the bales and crates in some port, with the icy wind and slashing rain pouring down on him. He didn't even have a roof over his head! And Maria Petrovna has a very nice house. And earrings and pins, and gold chains!"

"That's because she's flutter-brained."

I didn't know what flutter-brained was, but I could tell by the way Daddy said it that it was something awful so I said, "But the Ancient Mariner was very noble. He rescued his sick friend. And then, Daddy, after all, he only tricked those lousy rich men, and Maria Petrovna tricked me. Why does she keep fooling me? I'm not a rich man."

"Forget about it," Mommy said. "And don't be so upset."

Daddy looked at her and shook his head but didn't say anything. He and I were lying side by side on the couch. It was so warm lying next to him that I felt sleepy. But before falling asleep I remember saying to myself,

"How can you compare that horrible Maria Petrovna with the Ancient Mariner?"

WATERMELON LANE

I came home dog-tired and filthy after a soccer game but feeling great, because we'd beat the team from the next house 44:37. I rinsed my hands quickly and went straight to the kitchen, sat down at the table and said, "You know, Mommy, I could eat a bear."

She smiled. "A live bear?"

"Yep."

Mommy turned back from the stove. She was holding a steaming plate. I guessed it was my favorite pickle soup. Mommy set the plate before me and said, "Here you are."

But it was milk soup with noodles and all full of skin. It was practically the same as farina. There were always lumps in the cereal and there was always skin in the milk-and-noodle soup. It makes me gag to even look at it, to say nothing about trying to eat it.

"I don't want it."

"We won't even discuss it!" Mommy said.

"It's full of skin."

"Which skin?"

Daddy came in. He looked at us and said, "What's the big discussion all about?"

"Look at him! He refuses to eat his dinner! He'll soon be eleven, but he's acting like a spoiled baby."

I'll soon be nine. Mommy keeps saying I'll soon be eleven. When I was eight, she kept saying I'd soon be ten.

"Why won't he eat it?" Daddy asked. "Did the soup get burned, or is it too salty?"

"It's boiled milk and noodles and there's skin in it."

Daddy shook his head. "So that's it. His Majesty doesn't want to have his soup. He probably wants marzipan figures on a silver platter."

I laughed, because I like Daddy's jokes. "What's marzipan?"

"I don't know. Something sweet that smells of cologne. Made especially for Your Majesty. Go on and eat your soup, Dennis."

"But there's skin in it."

"You have an easy life, my boy," Daddy said and turned to Mommy. "Remove his plate. It makes me sick to look at him. He doesn't like cereal, he doesn't want noodle soup. Isn't he finicky? It makes me sick!"

He sat down opposite me and looked at me as if he'd never seen me in his life before. He didn't say anything, but just kept looking at me like that. I stopped smiling right away, because I saw we weren't joking any more. Daddy sat there in silence. Mommy and I were silent, too. Then he started speaking, but he wasn't speaking to me or to Mommy. He sounded like he was speaking to a friend we couldn't see.

"I don't think I'll ever forget that terrible autumn," he said. "Moscow was so cold and gray. It was wartime, and the nazis were pressing on towards the city. We were all hungry and cold. The grownups never smiled. They kept listening to the hourly news dispatches over the radio."

"I was about eleven at the time, and I was growing very quickly, getting very tall, and I was hungry all the time. There was never enough for me to eat. I kept asking my parents for food, but they only had their own small bread rations and they shared them with me. Even that wasn't enough, so I'd go to sleep on a hungry stomach and dream of bread. I wasn't the only one. It was the same everywhere. So much has been written about those times."



"One day as I was walking down a little side street near our house I saw a big truck piled high with watermelons. I didn't know how they'd ever reached Moscow. They were probably going to be rationed. A thin man was standing on top of the truck. He'd pick up a watermelon, and throw it down to another man. That man would pass it on to the woman clerk who worked in the fruit store, and she'd pass it on to someone else. They stood in a line, passing the watermelons from high up on the truck right into the fruit store. You'd think they were playing a game with striped green balls.

"I stood there watching them for a long time, and the man on the truck kept smiling down at me. He was a very kind-looking man.

I finally got tired of standing there watching them. As I was about to turn and go back home one of the people in the line missed a catch. A big watermelon hit the pavement. Right next to me. It cracked open. There was the thin white inner rind and the crimson center full of sugary veins and black pits. The sight and smell of that juicy red watermelon made me realize how terribly hungry I was. But I turned away and started home. I'd only taken a few steps when I heard someone shouting,

""Hey, you! Boy!"

"I turned around. The man who'd been standing on top of the load was coming, towards me, carrying the cracked watermelon.

""Here, son. Take it. Take it home. It's for you."

"Before I had a chance to say anything he put the watermelon in my hands and hurried back to the truck. I clutched the watermelon. It was so heavy I could barely carry it. When I got home I called my friend Valya, and the two of us ate that huge watermelon. Oh, how delicious it was! I can't even begin to tell you. First, we cut off two big slices. When we sank our teeth into them the rims made our ears wet. Pink watermelon juice ran down our chins. Our stomachs bloated up till they looked like two watermelons. If you'd smack a stomach like that it would sound like a drum. We only regretted not having any bread to eat with it, because then it really would have been a feast. Yes..."

Daddy turned to look out of the window.

"That autumn the cold was penetrating. Dry snow kept falling that was carried

away by the wind. We had still less food than before, and the nazis were getting closer and closer to Moscow. I was hungry, but instead of dreaming of bread as I had before, I'd begun dreaming of bread and watermelons. One morning I got up and saw that my stomach had disappeared. It had simply vanished. I could think of nothing but food. So I went over to my friend Valya's house and said, 'Let's go to that watermelon lane. Maybe they're unloading watermelons again, and maybe one will fall and crack again, and maybe they'll let us have it again.'

"So we tied our grandmothers' shawls on top of our coats and hats, because it was so bitterly cold, and went back to Watermelon Lane. It was a gray day. There were hardly any people on the street. It was very quiet outside, not at all like it is now. There wasn't a soul in Watermelon Lane. We stood outside the fruit store waiting for a truck carrying watermelons to drive up. After a long while it began getting dark. Still, there was no truck.

"It'll probably come tomorrow,' I said.

"Yes. It'll probably come tomorrow,' Valya agreed.

"So we went back home. The next day we went to Watermelon Lane again. There was no truck. We kept going every single day, waiting for it, but it never came again."

Daddy stopped talking. He sat looking out of the window as if he could see something there that neither Mommy nor I could.

Mommy went over to him, but he got up quickly and left the room. She followed him. I was left all by myself. I sat there, looking out of the window like Daddy had done. All of a sudden I thought I could see Daddy and his friend Valya shivering in the cold and waiting. The wind tore at them, and the snow. They were frozen stiff, but they still kept standing there, waiting. Waiting. Just waiting.

I felt so scared I grabbed my plate and started eating as fast as I could. Then I tipped it and drank the last drop of boiled milk. Then I wiped the plate clean with a piece of bread and ate that. Then I licked my spoon.

THE BLUE DAGGER

It all began during our shop lesson. Raisa Ivanovna said each of us was to make a calendar that would be like a notepad, with one sheet for each day. We were supposed to use our imaginations. I took a piece of cardboard, covered it with green paper, made a slit in the middle and attached a matchbox to it. Then I cut a little stack of paper to fit the matchbox and pasted the sheets together like a pad. I wrote "May Day Greetings" on the top sheet.

It was a lovely calendar for little children. Actually, it was a doll's calendar for a dollhouse. A toy one. Raisa Ivanovna gave me an "A" for it and said it was lovely.

I went back to my seat and sat down. Then Lenny took his calendar up to her. Raisa Ivanovna looked at it and said,

"This is very sloppy work." And she gave him a "C".

After the bell for recess rang Lenny stayed in his seat. He looked sort of miserable. I was busy blotting an inkblot but when I saw him looking so miserable I went over to him. I was still holding the blotting paper. I wanted to cheer him up, because he's my friend and he once gave me a coin with a hole in the middle. He also promised to give me an empty shotgun cartridge so I could make an atomic telescope. I went over to him and said, "Hey, Sloppy!" and crossed my eyes.

That's when he snatched his pencil box and cracked it on my skull. And that's when I understood what seeing stars was all about. I got so mad at him I swatted him with the blotting paper. Naturally, he didn't even feel it. He grabbed his briefcase and went home. Tears were dropping right on the blotting paper and spreading out like invisible inkblots, because he'd hit me so hard.

That's when I decided I'd kill him. I spent the whole afternoon making a dagger. I was making it out of Daddy's blue plastic letter opener. I snatched it from his desk and spent hours sharpening it on the stove. It was taking an awfully long time to get sharp, but I kept at it picturing myself at school the next day. My blue dagger would flash when I raised it over Lenny's head. He'd fall to his knees and beg for mercy. Then I'd say, "Apologize!"

And he'd say, "Forgive me!"

And I'd laugh a booming laugh like this: "Ho-ho-ho-ho!" And my terrible laughter would echo away in the canyons. And all the girls'd get scared. They'd all hide under their desks.

I kept tossing around in bed that night and sighing, because I was sorry for Lenny. He was a fine kid but he'd have to pay for what he'd done. For hitting me so hard. I had the blue dagger under my pillow. I was practically groaning as I clutched the handle. Mommy finally came in and said,

"What're you groaning about?"

"Nothing."

"D'you have a stomach ache?"

I didn't feel like answering, so I turned to the wall and started breathing deeply, pretending I was fast asleep.

I couldn't eat a thing the next morning. All I had was two cups of tea, bread and butter, a frankfurter and mashed potatoes. Then I went to school. I put the blue dagger on top of my books in my briefcase, so's it'd be easy to get at it quickly.

I stood outside the classroom door for a long time. My heart was beating so loud I couldn't go in, but I finally got a grip on myself and pushed the door open. Things looked the same as always. Lenny was standing by the window with Valery. The minute I saw him I started unbuckling my briefcase to get out my dagger. Lenny was coming towards me fast. I thought he wanted to hit me again and started working away at the buckle, but he stopped next to me, stood there sort of awkwardly, and then bent real close to me and said,

"Here!"

He was holding out the empty shotgun cartridge.



He looked like he wanted to say something else but was too shy. I didn't want him to say anything. I just suddenly forgot all about wanting to kill him.

It was as if I'd never intended to anyway. It really was amazing.

"It's a swell cartridge," I said, took it and went straight to my seat.

THE MAN WITH THE BLUE FACE

We were sitting on some logs near Uncle Volodya's summer cottage. Daddy was whittling a willow stick for my bow, and I was waxing the bowstring. Everything was peaceful and quiet. The only noise was the chug-chug-chug of a steamroller at the far end of the street. It was rolling out asphalt, because they were paving the street. The driver's seat was very high up, so that when the steamroller rolled by the cottage all I could see of it was the driver's head sailing along over the top of the fence. His face was blue, because even though he shaved he had a heavy beard.

The driver had a woman helper. The head that sailed by next to his had a face with rosy cheeks and pretty eyes.

I knew that they'd gone to have their lunch in Sosenki where their garage was. They'd started working at night when we were all asleep, because it was cool then.

The man with the blue face nicked my leg with a switch once because I'd tried to start up the steamroller while he was away. I didn't like him. I was afraid he'd tell Daddy on me, but he didn't even notice me and sailed right by.

Daddy and I were sitting there on the logs. I was whistling. Daddy wasn't saying anything. We kept smiling at each other now and then, because we like living in a summer colony. We'd been staying there for nearly a week, so I knew all the boys and the dogs. We went rowing, made campfires, went mushroom-picking and had even seen a mother elk and a baby elk crossing a field.

Today Daddy and I were going to shoot some arrows, and then we were going to fly a kite right up to the sun. While I was thinking about all this the gate clicked and our neighbor Alexander Semyonovich came over. He has a Volga and he and Daddy are friends. He sat down beside us and said,

"I don't know what to do."

"What's the matter?" Daddy asked.

Alexander Semyonovich said his driver was getting married that day.

"Why should that upset you?"

"I've got to be in town today at all costs." Daddy said nothing.

"How about showing some neighborly feeling and lending a helping hand?"

"I'm on vacation. I'm spending it with my son," Daddy said.

"Why, he'll enjoy the ride," Alexander Semyonovich said and slapped me on the back. "We'll take him along."

Now at last I saw what he was getting at and wondered why I hadn't guessed it right away. Our neighbor couldn't drive his own car! He didn't have a license yet. Daddy can drive any kind of car, because he has a license. He even took part in a rally once. But he doesn't have a car. He's a top-notch driver, though. Alexander Semyonovich said he wished Daddy would drive him to town and back.

I could see that Daddy wasn't very excited by the idea, because he was happy just sitting in the sun near the barn, wearing his old slacks and whittling a stick. He didn't feel like going anywhere. I thought it was a great idea, though, so I said,

"Let's go! Sure, we will!"

Then Alexander Semyonovich jumped up, "That's the right spirit! Let's go!"



Daddy gave in, though he did say, "I've got to be back by three."

Alexander Semyonovich pressed his hand to his heart and said, "By two! May I drop dead on the spot if we're not back by two. Have no fear about that."

Daddy and I changed. Then he drove the car out of Alexander Semyonovich's yard and we got in. Alexander Semyonovich sat beside Daddy and I got in the back. I kept looking straight ahead at the road, at the speedometer, at the woods and at the oncoming traffic, pretending I was driving. Then the car became a rocket-ship, and I was the first earthman to fly to outer space and the cool stars.

It was a wonderful ride! Everything was green: the grass, the big trees and the tiny birches. The wind was strong and warm, and it also smelted green.

I stood behind Daddy, whistling and staring at the road ahead. It was as shiny as silver, and if I bent my head I could see the hot air shimmering and oozing over it.

Now and then I'd spot something on the road: a board, which had probably fallen off the back of some truck, a clump of hay, and I had no trouble guessing where that had come from, or the kind of rags drivers use to wipe the grease off their hands. I had a feeling the road was telling me who'd driven along it before us.

We were speeding along. I was playing rocketship again, pulling levers, pressing buttons and keeping my foot on the gas as I took us past Mars and the Moon, and still farther. Then I decided I was weightless and began jumping up and down to see whether I really was or not.

"Stop jumping!" Daddy said.

So I went back to staring at the road and just then I saw the girl. She was running right ahead of us. I don't know where she'd come from, because she hadn't been there a moment before. She just suddenly appeared from nowhere!

The car swerved to the right. The horn blared.

I remember seeing the girl sprint to the right too, which meant she was right in front of the car again. Then there was a terrible screeching and clashing. It felt like someone'd suddenly yanked the car by the tail end. Then everything became sort of crazy.

First, I felt that I'd had an electric shock. Then something whined inside the car, and then crunched. The horn kept on blowing. I was pressed against the back of the front seat and was clutching it as hard as I could. Through the window I saw all the birch trees topple over to one side. Then they jumped back into place again. Then they toppled over again. Then everything stopped. I was on my hands and knees. An open window was on top of me. I felt I was in a submarine, or at the bottom of a well. Then I began scrambling like a cat, grabbing whatever I could get my hands on: the seat covers, the door handles, until I was finally out in the fresh air again. The car was lying on its side on the bottom of a small slope at the edge of the road. All the windows had been knocked out. Smoke was curling up from under the hood. The roof was squashed like an old hat. The car was making a droning sound. The wheels were still spinning, just like a beetle's legs will move when you flip it over on its back.

Somebody was climbing through the front window of the car. It was Alexander Semyonovich. He came over to me and said, "D'you know where my left shoe is?"

He only had one shoe on. He turned and looked back at the car, clutched his head and said again, "I don't know what happened to my shoe. Help me look for it."

I started hunting around in the grass, but couldn't find it. The car was humming strangely. It was a terrible sound that sent shivers down my spine, so I backed away.

A truck pulled up by the side of the road. Some soldiers jumped out of it and ran down to us. One of them looked into the car, waved to the others and shouted,

"There's a man in here! Hurry!"

The soldiers crowded around the car and set it right side up. It kept on droning. You'd think it was calling for help.

All of a sudden I remembered that Daddy was still inside the car! How could I've forgotten about him? I was scared to death and dashed back to the car.

Something was wrong with the way Daddy was sitting behind the wheel. His body was turned back as if he was looking out of the rear window. His arm was stuck through the bent wheel and was blowing the horn, and it was all blue and swollen and bleeding.

The soldiers began straightening out the steering wheel. Then they opened the front door and helped Daddy out. He was very pale. Even his eyes were pale. His arm dangled. It didn't even seem to belong to him. I ran over and stood right in front of him, but he didn't really notice me; just then a motorcycle drove up. There were two militiamen on it. One of them said,

"Let's see your license!"

Daddy was standing sideways, so the militiaman couldn't see his bleeding right arm. Daddy tried to get his left hand into his right pocket but couldn't. I got his driver's license out of his pocket for him. Daddy looked at me. I thought, by the way he did, that he'd just remembered I'd been with him all along. He grabbed hold of me with his left arm and bent down real close, but when he spoke his voice seemed to be coming from someplace far away.

"Is it you?" He began shaking me. Then he began shouting, "Where are you hurt? Tell me!"

"No place. I'm all right."

Daddy crouched down and leaned against the front wheel. His face got all wet. Big drops of sweat were running down his forehead. He began slipping sideways, I thought he wanted to lie down. I grabbed his shirt to keep him from lying down on the ground.

Then a man in a white doctor's smock came towards us. He kneeled beside Daddy and lifted his right arm. "It's a double fracture," the doctor said.

He helped Daddy up and led him over to the ambulance. There were a lot of people there by now, a lot of cars, buses and even the steamroller that had been paving our street. I followed the doctor and Daddy, but was shoved away by the crowd. When Daddy reached the top of the slope I saw the man with the blue face who drove the steamroller hurry over to him. He said something to Daddy and Daddy nodded. Then Daddy got into the ambulance. I decided I'd run after it till I caught up with them, but Daddy turned and shouted something to me. I didn't understand what he said.

The ambulance drove off. I started running after it, but stopped halfway up the slope, because it was so steep and my heart was beating so fast. I could see the Volga down below. It looked like a tank that'd been hit by a shell. Alexander

Semyonovich came around from the rear of the car and said,

"Imagine, my shoe was in the luggage compartment! Incredible!"

One of the militiamen came over to him.

"This boy sure was born under a lucky star. There's not a scratch on him! Now then: is this your car?" he said and started writing in his notepad.

Just as I was going to ask him when they'd bring Daddy back a man shouted from up on the road,

"We're taking the boy home! There's no use him roasting in the sun here. We're paving their street. Right outside his house. Come on up here, sonny!" It was the man with the blue face.

"D'you want to go with him?" the militiaman asked.

I didn't know what to say. It wasn't right to leave Alexander Semyonovich all by himself. He probably guessed what I was thinking.

"That's all right. You go ahead," he said.

"Can you manage without me?"

"I'll try. There'll be people here to help me."

But I just stood there.

Then the pretty girl who was the driver's helper came down the slope. She took my hand and said. "We'll let him hold the wheel, won't we?" Then she said to the militiaman, "You tell him he can hold the wheel. He's going to drive the steamroller all by himself. He can even blow the horn if he wants to. He'll blow the horn, and everybody'll envy him, and you will too, won't you?" The militiaman said nothing. "Come here, dearie. You can hold onto the steering wheel, love."

She kept crooning, just as if I was a baby, and led me up the hill to the man with the blue face. He smelled of hot gasoline. He put my hands on the steering wheel and his own next to mine. His fingers were thick and his nails were very big.

He stepped on the gas, moved the levers, and the three of us rolled away from that terrible place. Everything was green again: the grass, the birches and even the wind smelled green. You'd think nothing had happened.

We kept rolling along with nobody saying anything and even though my hands were on the wheel I wasn't playing any kind of a game. I didn't feel like it. After a while the man with the blue face said to the girl,

"Just think what a fine dad this boy has. Few men would've risked it. He didn't want to hit that little girl. He smashed up his car instead. Though a car's only a pile of iron. You can fix a car. He didn't want to hit that girl. That's what counts. What I mean is, he risked his own boy's life instead. That man's a real fighter. A man with a real big heart. That's the kind of man we all respected so much at the front."

He put his finger on my nose and pressed it like a doorbell and said, "Rr-r-ring!"

And because he'd said what he had about my daddy I squeezed his big finger hard and burst into tears.

HEAVY TRAFFIC ON SADOVAYA STREET

Vanya Dykhov had a bicycle. It was an old bike, but it was still good. It used to belong to Vanya's father, but when it broke down he said to Vanya,

"Here you are. Try fixing it instead of just wasting your time and you can have it. It'll still last you for a while." Was Vanya happy! He wheeled it over to the far end of the yard and stopped wasting his time. He spent all his time fixing the bike: hammering, screwing and unscrewing all the parts. He was all full of axle grease, and his fingers were bruised, because he often missed and hit them when he was hammering. Still, he was coming along nicely, because he'd always been good at shop. He's in the fifth grade and they do metal work in shop. I helped him a lot. Every day he'd say,

"Just you wait, Dennis. As soon as we fix it I'll ride you on the carrier. We'll ride all over Moscow!"

I helped him still more because he is such a good friend, even though he is in the 5th grade and I'm only in the 2nd. I really tried hard when we worked on the carrier. I gave it four coats of black paint. After all, it was practically mine. It shone just like a new car. I kept thinking ahead to when I'd ride on it, holding onto Vanya's belt and bicycling around the world.

Finally, one day, Vanya set the bike upright, pumped air into the tires, wiped it with a clean rag, washed his hands in the rain barrel and pinned back his pants' cuffs with clothespins. This was the great day. Vanya got on his bike and pedalled off. At first he did a slow circle around the yard. The wheels were spinning smoothly, scratching softly along the ground. Vanya began pedalling faster. The spokes flashed. He began zig-zagging and doing figure-eights. He'd pedal real fast and then jam on the brakes, stopping dead. Vanya was testing every part of the bike like a test-pilot, I stood there watching him just like an airplane mechanic watches his pilot in the air. I was glad he was such a good rider though I can probably ride even better or, at any rate, not worse than him. But it was his bike, not mine, so it didn't make any difference. He could do whatever he wanted to. You'd never guess it was an old bike. It was better than a new one. Especially the carrier.

Vanya kept galloping around for about half an hour. I was beginning to think

he'd forgotten all about me, but he hadn't. He rode up, steadied himself by bracing one foot against the fence, and said,

"Come on, get on!"

While I was climbing on I asked, "Where'll we go?"

"What's the difference? Out into the wide blue yonder!"

I suddenly felt as if that wide blue yonder was full of happy people who were just waiting for Vanya and me to come and visit them, and when we did, with Vanya at the wheel and me on the carrier, it'd be the signal for a great festival to begin. There'd be colored flags and balloons, and singing and ice cream, and brass bands, and clowns doing handstands.

That was the wonderful feeling I had as I settled back on the carrier and grapped hold of Vanya's belt. Vanya began to pedal. Goodbye, Daddy! Goodbye, Mommy! Goodbye, old yard! and everything in it! We're off into the wide blue yonder!

Vanya rode out of the yard. He turned the corner and we bicycled up and down a lot of side streets. Everything looked different now. It was all so strange. Vanya kept ringing the bell so's not to run anyone over.

We sped along like lightning. I was feeling great and wanted to shout at the top of my voice. So I shouted "A-a-a-a-ah!" My shout sounded funny when we bicycled into a tiny lane paved with cobblestones. The bike rattled over them and my "A-a-ah's" sounded like barking or coughing. I was shouting: "Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!" But then we were onto a paved street again and it was coming out "A-a-a-a-ah!" again.

We kept on bicycling up one street and down another till we got tired. Vanya stopped, and I jumped down.

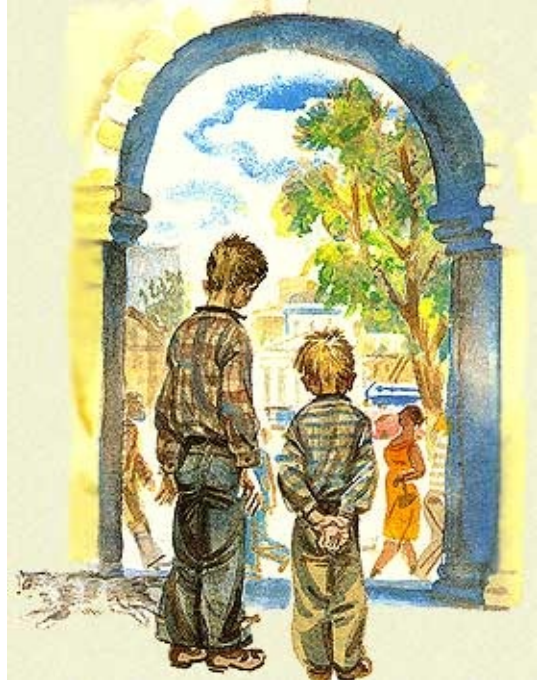
"How was it?" he asked.

"Terrific!"

"Were you comfortable?"

"It was like riding on a featherbed. Even better. What a bike! It's a real winner!"

He laughed and smoothed down his hair that was all standing on end. His face was dirty and dusty, but that only made his eyes bluer and his teeth whiter.



That's when that big boy came over to us. He was tall, and he had a gold tooth. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt and his arms were covered with drawings. A shaggy little mutt that looked like it'd been made of scraps and bits was following him. It had black tufts and white tufts, and brown tufts, and one was even green. Its tail was curled, and it stood still on three paws with a front one crooked.

"Where are you from, boys?" he asked.

"From Kachalov Street."

"You don't say? See how far you've come! Is this your bike?"

"Yes," Vanya said. "It used to be my Dad's, but it's mine now. I fixed it myself. And he," here Vanya pointed at me, "helped me."

"You don't say? You'd never guess it to look at you. Why, you're just a pair of engineers."

"Is this your dog?" I asked.

"Yes. It's a very valuable dog. It's pedigreed. It's a Spanish dachshund."

"No, it isn't! That's no dachshund. They're long and narrow," Vanya said.

"Shut up, if you don't know what you're talking about! Moscow dachshunds are long 'cause they spend their lives under the cupboard and grow long and low. But this is a different kind. He's a very valuable dog. And a faithful friend. His name's Thief." After a while he sighed a couple of times and said, "But what's the use? He's a faithful friend, but he's still a dog and can't help me in this time of trouble." His eyes got full of tears.

My heart skipped a beat. What was it?

"What's the matter?" Vanya asked. He sounded scared.

The big boy swayed and leaned against the wall. "My Granny's dying," he said and began gasping and sobbing. "She's dying. She has double appendicitis." He cocked an eye at us and added, "Double appendicitis and measles." He sobbed and wiped his tears on his sleeve. My heart was pounding by now. Meanwhile, he leaned more comfortably against the wall and began crying out loudly. His dog looked at him and began to howl. It was really awful. Vanya turned pale under the dust on his face. He put his hand on the big boy's shoulder and said in a shaky voice,

"Please don't cry! Why're you bawling?"

"Because," the big boy said and shook his head. "Because I don't have the strength to reach the drugstore. I haven't eaten in three days! Ohh! Oww! Ooh!" He began howling still louder.

The valuable Spanish dachshund did, too. There was nobody in sight. I didn't know what to do, but Vanya never gets ruffled in an emergency,

"Have you got the prescription? If you do, give it to me. I'll ride to the drugstore and back in no time. I'll get the medicine for you."

Good for Vanya! I'll never be lost with a friend like him. He always knows what to do. Sure. We'd go for the medicine and save the big boy's granny.

"Give us the prescription! We can't waste time!" I shouted.

But he began shaking worse than before. He waved his hand, stopped howling

and shouted, "How can I? You must be crazy! How can I let two kids like you go to Sadovaya Street? Huh? Riding a bike? Don't you know what the traffic's like there? Huh? Why, you'll be mashed to a pulp in no time flat. With your arms and legs and heads all scattered! There are five-ton trucks there! And speeding tower-cranes! If you get run over it won't matter to you, but think of me! I'll be responsible. No, I can't let you go. Not for anything. I'd rather my poor old granny died!" And he began to howl in his gruff voice again. His valuable Spanish dachshund had never stopped howling in the first place. I couldn't take it any more. Here was this big boy, so noble and ready to sacrifice his granny as long as no harm came to us. I felt my mouth turning down at the corners and knew that in another second I'd begin to howl just as loudly as his dog. Vanya sniffled, too.

"What'll we do?" he asked.

"That's no problem," the big boy said in a very business-like voice. "There's only one way out. Lend me your bike. I'll go for the medicine and come right back. May I never get out of jail if I don't!" and he drew the side of his hand across his throat in a terrible pledge. Then he put a hand out towards the handlebars, but Vanya was still holding on to the bike. The big boy wagged it, then dropped his hand and began to sob again. "Owww! My poor old granny's going to die for nothing. And she could've gone on living. Ohhh..." He began to pull his hair.

I couldn't take it. It was too terrible for words. I burst out crying and said to Vanya, "Lend him the bike. His granny'll die! What if it was your granny?"

But Vanya held on to his bike. "I'll go for the medicine myself," he said through his tears.

Then the big boy bellowed, "Don't you trust me? Don't you? Are you too stingy to lend me your old rattletrap for a minute? Let the poor old lady die! Is that it? You want her to die of measles? Sure, what's it to you? You couldn't care less! You're just a bunch of murderers! Worried about an old bike!" He tore a button off his shirt, threw it down and began stamping on it.

We stood frozen to the spot. Then he suddenly snatched up his dog and thrust it at us, saying,

"Here! I'm giving you my best friend as a deposit. Now do you believe me? Do you? I'm giving you a valuable Spanish dachshund as a deposit!" And he

deposited the dog in Vanya's arms.

It all seemed clear to me now, so I said, "He's giving us his dog, Vanya. He'll have to come back for it, because the dog is his friend. Besides, it's a very valuable dog. Go on, lend him the bike. Don't worry."

So Vanya handed over the bike and said, "Will you be back in fifteen minutes?"

"Much sooner. It'll only take me five. Wait for me here. Don't move from the spot." He leaped on the saddle, started off and turned straight into Sadovaya Street.

As he was turning the corner the valuable dog suddenly sprang out of Vanya's arms and streaked after him.

"Catch it!" Vanya shouted.

"We'll never catch it. He's gone after his owner. A dog can't live without its owner. That's what a faithful friend's really like. I wish I had a dog like him."

"But that was our deposit, wasn't it?" Vanya said sort of doubtfully.

"Don't worry. They'll be back soon."

We waited for five minutes.

"I can't see him yet," Vanya said.

"There's probably a lot of people in the drugstore."

Two more hours passed and still the big boy hadn't come back. Neither had the valuable dog. When it began to get dark Vanya took my hand and said,

"That's it. Let's go home."

"What's it?"

"I'm a stupid fool. He'll never come back. And I'll never see my bike again. Or the valuable Spanish dachshund either." Vanya didn't say another word.

He probably didn't want to scare me, but I kept thinking about what had

probably happened anyway.

The traffic on Sadovaya Street is so heavy...

THE WHEELS GO CLATTER-CLATTER

This summer Daddy had to go away on business for two days. On the day he was to leave he said, "I think I'll take Dennis along."

I looked at Mommy quickly, but she didn't say anything.

Then Daddy said, "Go on, tie him to your apron strings. Let him follow you around on a leash."

Then Mommy's eyes got as green as gooseberries and she said, "Do whatever you want to. You can take him to the North Pole for all I care." And she stamped out.

That evening Daddy and I boarded a train and set off on our trip. There were a lot of people in the car: men, women, old ladies, some big boys and a small girl. It was lots of fun. People were talking and laughing. We opened some cans of food and had tea in glasses that were set in glass-holders, and also had huge chunks of salami. Then a young man took his accordion down from the top berth and played and sang a sad song about a boy who fell into the grass by his horse's hooves and closed his brown eyes, and his red blood flowed onto the green grass.

I went over to the window and stood looking out at the tiny lights flashing by in the darkness and kept thinking about the young soldier in the song and telling myself that if I'd gone off on that mission with him he might not have been killed. Then Daddy came up to me and we were silent together for a while.

"Don't be so sad," he said. "We'll be back the day after tomorrow and you'll be able to tell Mommy all about the interesting things you've seen." He made up our berth, then called me over and said, "D'you want to lie next to the wall?"

"No. You lie there. I want to be on the outside."

"Why?"

I whispered, "'Cause I had two glasses of tea and maybe I'll have to get up at night. Understand?"

Everybody laughed. Daddy pressed over to the wall. He was lying on his side. I was lying on my side too, but I was on the outside. The wheels were clattering away.

I woke up in the middle of the night because I was hanging halfway over the edge of the berth. Daddy must've turned around and squeezed me out. I wanted to settle back more comfortably, but suddenly felt I was wide awake. I sat up and started looking around. It was getting light. I could see arms and legs all about me. Some of the feet had socks on them and some were just bare. One was a very small foot and belonged to the little girl.

The train was moving very slowly now. Green branches were passing close to the windows. I thought we were moving through a tunnel in the woods. I wanted to see more of it and went down to the end of the car. The door was wide open. I gripped the handrail, sat down and hung my feet over the side.

It was cold sitting there, because all I had on was my shorts and the iron floor was icy. But after a while it got warmer. I tucked my hands into my armpits and sat there. There was a soft breeze blowing. The train was still moving very slowly. The wheels were clicking. I made up a song:

The train is speeding down the tracks,
The wheels go clatter-clatter!

I looked off to the right and saw the end of our train. It was curved like a tail. Then I looked off to the left and saw the locomotive. It was crawling along like a beetle. I guessed we were on a curve.

A man was walking along a narrow path beside the tracks. He'd looked very tiny from far away, but since the train was moving faster than he was, he kept getting bigger. He had on a blue shirt, dark pants and heavy boots. I could see by the way he moved his boots that he was tired. He was carrying something. When the train caught up with him he suddenly turned off the path and began running alongside us. His boots scrunched on the gravel and made the pebbles fly. Soon I was right beside him. He held out a wooden sieve covered with a towel and kept on running along beside me. His face was red and sweaty. Then he shouted,



"Hang on to the sieve, sonny!" and slipped it onto my lap.

I clutched it. The man grabbed hold of the handrails, got a foot on the step, pulled himself up and sat down beside me. He wiped his face on his sleeve and said,

"I just made it."

"Here's your sieve," I said.

But he didn't take it. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Dennis."

"My boy's name is Sasha."

"What grade is he in?"

"Second."

"You should say 'the second'."

He chuckled, but sounded angry, and pulled the towel off the basket. There were silvery leaves under the towel. The smell of the sieve made my mouth water. The

man began picking the leaves off carefully, one at a time. The sieve was full of raspberries. Although they were very red, they seemed to have been brushed with silver. They were perfect. None were squashed. My eyes popped,

"They're touched with the early morning cold," the man said.

"Go on, help yourself."

I picked up a berry and put it in my mouth. And then another, squashing it against the roof of my mouth with my tongue. I went on eating them, one at a time. Could anything have been more delicious? The man kept watching me as if I were sick or something, or as if he was very sorry for me.

"Don't pick at them like that. Scoop up a handful." And he turned away so's I wouldn't be shy, probably.

But I wasn't shy. I'm never shy when I'm with nice people. Anyway, I started scooping the berries up by the handful. I decided that I'd eat them all, even if I burst. Nothing had ever tasted as good in my life, and I'd never been so happy. Then I remembered the man had a boy named Sasha and said, "Did Sasha have any berries?"

"Sure, he did. There were berries, and he had them."

"Why'd you say there were berries? Didn't he have any today?"

The man pulled off his boot and shook out a tiny pebble, "It nearly killed me, and such a little thing." He was silent for a while and then said, "And a little thing can make your soul bleed, too. Sasha's living in town now, my boy. He's gone and left me."

I was very surprised. That was really something. Why, he was only in the second grade and he'd gone and run away from home!

"Did he run away by himself or with a friend?"

"He went off with his mother. She decided she needed more education. She's got relatives there, and friends. It's a nice how-d'you-do. Sasha's in town, and I'm here. What a situation."

"Don't worry. He'll learn to be a locomotive driver and then he'll come back. Wait and see."

"It's too long to wait."

"Where does he live?"

"Kursk."

"You should say 'in Kursk'."

He chuckled again. It was a hoarse chuckle and sounded like he had a cold. Then he bent towards me and said, "All right, Professor. I'll get some more education, too. The war kept me out of school. When I was your age we cooked tree bark for food." He was thinking about something. Then he looked up and pointed towards the woods. "In this very forest, sonny. Krasnaya Village'll come into sight as soon as the woods end. These two hands helped to put it back on the map after the war. That's where I get off."

"I'll just have one more handful and then you tie it up again," I said.

He pressed the sieve into my lap and said, "That's not what I meant. You keep it." He put his hand on my bare shoulder and I could feel how heavy and strong it was, how dry and warm, and rough. He pulled me against his blue shirt and held me tight for a few seconds. He was warm and he smelled of bread and tobacco. I could hear him breathing slowly, but loudly. Then he said, "Goodbye, sonny. Be a good boy." He stroked my head and then suddenly jumped off the moving train.

A few moments later he was way behind us, but I could still hear the gravel crunching under his heavy boots. He was getting smaller and smaller. Then he climbed the slope quickly, that kind man in the blue shirt.

The train began speeding up, making the wind stronger and colder, I picked up the sieve of raspberries and carried it back into the car to Daddy. The frost on the berries was melting away. They were not as silvery as before but still, the smell was like a blossoming orchard.

Daddy was sound asleep. He'd spread out his arms and legs. There was no room for me. There was no one I could show the berries to. There was no one I could

tell about the man in the blue shirt or his son Sasha. All the passengers were sound asleep.

When I set the basket on the floor I saw that the raspberry juice had stained my stomach, hands and legs red. I decided to go and wash the sticky juice off, but suddenly felt very drowsy.

There was a large suitcase standing on end in the corner. We'd used it as an extra table the evening before. I leaned over on it. The wheels began clattering louder than ever. I felt warm all over as I listened to them, and the song I'd made up floated around in my head:

The train is speeding
down
the
tracks!

The wheels go
clatter-
clatter!

MASONS HAMMER AT STONES

Early in summer Misha, Kostya and I began going to the Dynamo swimming pool nearly every day. When we were little we didn't know how to swim, but then we learned. Misha learned to swim in the country, Kostya learned to swim at camp and I had swimming lessons at the Moskva Pool for two months. Now that we could all swim we knew there was no better place in the world than the Dynamo pool. That's for sure.

It's really wonderful to lie on the damp wooden boards on a bright sunny morning, breathe in the fresh smell of the Moskva River, hear the colored flags flapping on the high masts and the water lapping somewhere very close under the wooden boards. You can look off at the far bank and see the stone-masons fixing the embankment. They keep tapping away at the pink granite slabs with their hammers. The sound reached us a little after they struck the stone. It was a faint, ringing sound. You'd think someone was tapping a silver xylophone with glass hammers.

It was fun to tumble into the water after lying in the sun and then swim around as much as you wanted to and jump off the meter-high stand and then dive as much as you wanted to. Then, when you got tired, it was good to go back to your friends and walk along the hot wooden pier with your chest puffed out and your arms flexed and stepping a bit pigeon-toed, because it looks fine when you walk that way, and that's the way everyone walked there.

This was not just any old little bathing beach with dingy sand and scraps of paper blowing around. And it wasn't a shady, grassy river bank, either. This was a real, professional athletic pool. Everything was clean and orderly here. This was skill, sport and good class. That's why everyone strutted around like champions. Sometimes they even strutted better than they swam.

That's why Misha, Kostya and I never missed a day that summer. We all got very tanned. We all learned to swim still better. And we got real muscles, real biceps and triceps. We knew every nook and cranny there. We knew where the first-aid station was, where the rides were and everything else. The place was like home to us.

One day, when we were lying on the pier in the sun, Kostya said,

"Can you dive from the high diving board, Dennis?"

I looked at the board. It wasn't too high or too scary. It couldn't be higher than the third story. No, it didn't look bad at all. So I said,

"Sure, I can. What's so special about that?"

"I bet you can't!" Misha said.

"You're a dope, Misha, that's who you are," I said.

"But it's ten meters high!"

"So what?"

"I bet you can't!" Kostya said.

Misha chimed right in, "Sure, he can't! I bet, I bet, I bet, you can't!"

"You're both a bunch of babies! That's what!" I stood up, puffed out my chest, flexed my arms and headed towards the high diving board, making sure I was walking pigeon-toed.

"I bet, I bet, I bet you won't-won't-won't!" Kostya shouted after me.

I didn't even bother to answer him. I was climbing the ladder. Every day I'd seen grown men dive from the high board. They arched their backs when they dived, they did somersaults in the air and jackknives and cut into the water cleanly, hardly ever even making a splash. And when they bobbed up again and climbed onto the pier they'd puff out their chests and flex their arms.

It was all very beautiful. I'd always known I could dive as well as they could, but



now, as I climbed the ladder, I decided I wouldn't do any fancy dives this first time. I'd just jump off, hands and arms pressed to my sides. That was the easiest way. That's how I'd dive the first time. But after that I'd do real fancy dives, especially for Misha's sake, to make him gape.

I was feeling great while I was thinking all this and was quickly climbing one little ladder after another. I never noticed how I reached the top, until I was suddenly standing ten meters above pool level.

That's when I saw how tiny the platform was. All around and ahead of it, as far as I could see, was a great and beautiful city, while here on the platform the wind was whistling, but really hard. In fact, it was blowing so hard it might easily blow me off altogether.

I couldn't hear the masons hammering at the stone, because the wind drowned out the tinkle of the little glass hammers.

When I looked down I saw the pool. It was blue, but so small it looked about the size of a cigarette pack. I knew that if I dived I'd probably miss it, because it'd be a cinch to overshoot it, especially since the wind was at least a six-knot wind that would probably blow me off course and into the river or, worse still, smack on top of somebody. Thinking all this made me wish I could hear the masons fixing the embankment just one last time and see Kostya and Misha again because they were my friends, after all.

I took a few steps back, grabbed the handrails and climbed down. When I reached the bottom I was feeling fine again. A great burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I was so glad to see Misha and Kostya that I began running towards them.

Those stupid fools were laughing their heads off and pointing at me, making-believe their sides were splitting.

"See him jump?"

"Ha-ha-ha!"

"What a dive!"

"Ho-ho-ho!"

"He did a swan dive!"

"He-he-he!"

"Ajackknife!"

"Oh-ho-ho!"

"He's a real brave man!"

"Good for him!"

"He can really boast!"

I sat down beside them. "You're both dopes. You think I got scared?"

This made them howl.

"Of course not! Ha-ha-ha!"

"What gave you that idea? Ho-ho-ho!"

"You weren't scared!"

"You were just frightened!"

"We'll write it up for the papers!"

"We'll ask them to give you a medal!"

"The champion ladder-climber-down!" I was boiling mad. How disgusting they both were, skinny old Kostya, and Misha and his croaky voice. They probably really thought I was scared. What a laugh! But I didn't insult them the way they were insulting me, 'cause I knew I could jump off that lousy old diving board any old time I felt like it. That's why I spoke to them calmly and politely. "To hell with you!" I said.

I trotted back to the diving board and was back up at the top in five seconds flat. Just then the sun hid behind a cloud. It got cold and gloomy up there. The wind was whistling and the tower was creaking and swaying. But I didn't hang back. I went right up to the very edge of the board, pressed my arms against my sides,

shut my eyes tight, bent my knees before jumping and... Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, I thought of Mommy. And Daddy, too. And Gran. I remembered that I hadn't said goodbye to them that morning before coming here and that now I might very well be killed by the dive. What a tragedy that would be for them. They'd be grief-stricken, because they'd have no me to love any more.

I imagined Mommy forever gazing at my photograph and weeping because I was her only child, and Daddy's, too. And they wouldn't go to the movies any more or visiting, because their life would be ruined. And who'd care for them when they got old? Besides, my life would be terrible without them, too, because I loved them just as much. Actually, though, I wouldn't be there to feel bad about it, because I'd be dead and would never see the sky again, or hear the masons tapping away at the slabs of granite on the embankment.

Was all this going to happen because of two stinky boys like Kostya and Misha?

Just thinking about so many people having to suffer on account of two stupid fools made my blood boil again. I decided I'd have to beat them both up, and the sooner the better.

So I climbed down again.

When Kostya saw me he got down on all fours and lowered his head. He began scrambling around in a circle on his hands and knees like that, looking just like a beetle. Misha turned blue and was gasping. He was having a laughing fit.

There was a whole crowd of big boys and girls nearby and they were all laughing, too. Kostya and Misha had probably told them. All of them were having a good laugh at my expense, and so were my friends.

Then I decided that everything that had happened until then had been chicken-feed. I just hadn't understood what it was all about, but now I think I did. So I turned and went back to the diving board. For the third time! They were snorting and grunting and squealing. But I climbed up to the top and went over to the very edge. My knees were trembling, but I got hold of them and pressed them very hard and spoke to myself in a low voice. I could hear my voice trembling and my teeth chattering as I mumbled.

"Scaredy cat! Baby! Chicken-livered! Jump this minute! Go on! Or else I'll never talk to you again! I won't ever shake your hand. Go on, jump! Hear me?"

This minute! Stinky louse! Smelly rat!"

This was too much. I was really insulted. I took a step forward and my stomach and heart both leaped into my mouth. While I was sailing down I had no time to think about anything. I just knew that I'd jumped. I'd jumped! I had! I really had!

When I bobbed up out of the water Misha and Kostya were holding their hands out to me. They pulled me up. We stretched out on the boards. They didn't say a word.

I lay there listening to the masons hammering away at the pink granite. It was a very faint sound, as if someone was striking a silver xylophone with a glass hammer.

A CHILDHOOD FRIEND

When I was six or six and-a-half I had no idea what I'd be when I grew up. I liked grownups and all the different kinds of work they did. All my thoughts were jumbled then. I just couldn't decide what I wanted to be.

First, I wanted to be an astronomer and stay up all night watching the stars through a telescope. Then I wanted to be the captain of a ship. I'd stand on the bridge with my feet set firmly apart, just like a real captain. I'd visit far-off Singapore and buy myself a pet monkey. Then I decided I'd be a station master in the Metro. Then I got all set to be an artist, the kind that draws the white stripes down the middle of the street to guide the traffic. Then I decided it might be a good idea to become a brave explorer like Alain Bombard and row across all the oceans with nothing to eat but raw fish. Alain Bombard had lost twenty-five kilos during his voyage, though, and since I only weighed twenty-six it meant that if I followed in his footsteps and lost that much I'd only weigh a kilo by the time I got back. But what if I caught a couple of fish less than him? I'd lose still more weight. Then I'd probably just dissolve. It'd be the last anyone ever saw of me. I decided to give up the idea.

The next day I was all set to become a boxer, because the evening before I'd watched the European boxing championship on TV. The way they pummelled each other! Then there were shots of the boxers in training. They showed them pounding at punching bags to develop their punches. After watching them I decided I'd become the strongest man in our yard. A man who could knock anyone out if I had to.

"Buy me a punching bag, Daddy," I said.

"What for?"

"So's I can practice. I'm going to be a boxer and win all my fights. Will you, huh?"

"How much does it cost?"

"Not much. Just about a hundred rubles. Or three hundred."

"You'll just have to manage as best as you can without it," he said and went off

to work.

I got mad at him because of the way he'd said it, like he was making fun of me. Mommy saw I was in the dumps and said, "I have an idea. Wait a minute."

She got out my basket of old toys. I didn't play with them any more, because I'd outgrown them. I'd be starting school in September.

As Mommy was rummaging in the basket I spotted my old trolley car that had lost its wheels, though it still had the old string. There was my plastic horn, my dented top, an arrow with a rubber tip, a sailboat sail and a lot of other junk. Then she pulled my big old teddy bear out from under everything else, tossed it onto the couch and said,

"Here. This is the teddy bear Aunt Mila gave you for your second birthday. It's a fine teddy bear. See how tightly-stuffed it is? It'll make a fine punching bag. And we won't have to buy you one."

Just then the phone rang and she left the room.

It was a great idea. I sat my teddy bear in a corner of the couch so's it'd be more convenient to develop my punch.

He was chocolate brown. The paint had come off his nose, and he had two different eyes: one was the yellow glass one he'd always had and the other was a button. I don't even know when Mommy'd sewn it on. But that didn't matter, because he was looking at me happily out of his different eyes. His hind paws were set wide apart, his big round belly bulged and his front paws were raised, as if he was saying he gave up before we'd even started.

I remembered the time my bear was my best friend. I played with him and slept with him and set him on the table when I ate, and fed him from my spoon. He looked so funny when some food got on his muzzle. He looked alive. And when we went to bed



I'd croon him a song as if he was my baby brother. I'd whisper bedtime stories right into his stiff, velvety ear. I loved him with all my heart then.

Here he was now, sitting on the couch, my former best friend, my best childhood friend, laughing out of his different eyes. And here I was, getting ready to develop my punch by socking him.

"What's the matter?" Mommy asked. She'd just come back into the room.

I didn't know what the matter was, so I didn't say anything, but I turned away. I didn't want her to guess by the sound of my voice or by my crooked mouth what the matter was. I looked up at the ceiling to make the tears roll back into me. Finally, I said, "Nothing. Nothing's the matter. I just changed my mind. I'm not going to be a boxer."

MY SISTER XENIA

One day, on a very ordinary day, I came home from school, had my lunch and went over to sit on the windowsill. I'd been thinking about sitting on the windowsill, watching the passers-by and not doing anything special. This was just the right time for it, so I made myself comfortable and began doing nothing. That was when Daddy barged in.

"Feeling bored?" he said.

"No. When's Mommy coming home? She's been gone for a week."

"Hang on to the window frame, because I don't want you to tumble off."

I gripped the frame, just in case, and said, "What's the matter?"

Daddy took a step back, pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, waved it at me and said, "She'll be home in an hour! Here's the telegram. I've come straight from work, just to tell you. We won't eat now. We'll all have lunch together. I'm going to the station to meet her. You tidy up a bit and wait for us. All right?"

I jumped off the windowsill. "Sure! Hooray! Run, Daddy! I'll clean up in a minute! Everything'll shine. Go on. Don't waste time! Bring Mommy right home."

Daddy dashed out and I got down to work. It was "All hands on deck!" like on a real ship, but the storm soon stopped and the waves straightened out. That's called a calm. That's when we sailors get down to work.

"One, two! Swish-swish! Chairs, line up! Attention! Broom and Dustpan, start sweeping? Hey, there, Floor, you look awful. I want you to shine. This minute! Right! Lunch, obey my order! Pot and Pan, one, two, up onto the stove!

Let's have a song.

When someone strikes a
match,
Watch the fire,
catch!

Go on warming up. There. Good for me. I'm a real help. A child like me is a blessing. When I grow up, you know what I'll be? I'll be-oho! I'll even be oho-oho! Ohohohoho! That's what I'll be!"

I went on playing and boasting to make the time go faster till Mommy and Daddy come back. Finally the door flew open and Daddy burst in again. He was very excited. His hat was pushed back on his head. He was playing on all sorts of imaginary instruments, as if he was a brass band and the conductor at the same time. Daddy was waving his hands.

"Boom, boom!" he shouted. That was the big bass drum playing in Mommy's honor. "Crash, crash!" went the brass cymbals. Then everything became a swirling, yelling chorus of a hundred voices.

Daddy was the whole hundred, but since the door was open I ran out into the hall to Mommy.

She was standing by the coat rack, holding a bundle. When she saw me she smiled and said softly, "Hello, darling. Did you miss me?"

"Awfully."

"I have a surprise for you."

"An airplane?"

"Here, have a look."

We'd both been speaking very softly. Mommy gave me the bundle.

"What is it?"

"This is your sister Xenia," Mommy said just as softly.

I didn't say anything.

Then Mommy turned down the lace corner and I saw my sister's face. It was so little you couldn't really see anything. I was clutching her as tightly as I could.

"Boom, boom, boom!" Daddy said, appearing beside me. "Attention, please," he

continued in an announcer's voice. "Dennis has just been presented with a new, live sister. Her name is Xenia. She's fifty centimeters from head to toe and fifty-five from toe to head. Net weight: 3 kilos, 250 grams, not counting the packaging."

Daddy crouched down beside me and put his hands under mine, because he was probably afraid I'd drop her. Then he spoke to Mommy in his usual voice. "Whom does she resemble?"

"You."

"No, she doesn't. In this little cap she looks just like old Korchagina-Alexandrovskaya, the famous actress whom I admired so in my youth. I'm convinced all new-born infants resemble Korchagina-Alexandrovskaya. Especially the nose. You can't miss the resemblance."

I stood there smiling like an idiot and holding my sister Xenia.

"Be careful, Dennis. Don't drop her," Mommy said in a worried voice.

"Don't worry, Mommy. I can lift a three-wheeler with one hand, so I won't drop a little thing like this."

"We're going to bathe her this evening," Daddy said.

He took the bundle with Xenia inside and I followed him, and Mommy followed me. We put Xenia in an empty drawer in the chest of drawers. She didn't even peep.

"This is only for one night," Daddy said. "I'll buy her a crib tomorrow. You see that nobody closes the drawer by accident, Dennis, or we might forget where we've put her."

We sat down to lunch. I kept jumping up every minute to look at Xenia, but



she went right on sleeping. It was amazing. I kept touching her cheek. It was as soft as silk. Now, when I'd had a close look at her, I saw she had long, dark eyelashes.

That evening we got ready to bathe her. Xenia was lying in the drawer, waiting. She seemed to be worried, because she kept making creaking sounds like a squeaking door, but Daddy kept cheering her up so she wouldn't be too scared. He rolled up his sleeves and said in a cheery voice,

"Who's the best swimmer? Who's the best diver? Who's the best bubble-blower?"

You could see by Xenia's look that she thought she was the best diver and swimmer. Daddy's pep talk had done the job. But when we started bathing her she got so scared you'd think her own parents were going to drown their only daughter. She felt around for the bottom of the baby tub with her heel, found it, braced herself against it and finally calmed down. Her face smoothed out a bit. She didn't look as miserable as before and she let us pour water on her. Still, she looked like she thought Daddy might dunk her.

I ducked under Mommy's elbow and offered Xenia my finger. I'd guessed right and done the right thing, because she grabbed it and calmed down completely. She clutched it as hard as a drowning man clutches at a straw. I felt so sorry for her, holding on to me of all people, holding on as fast as she could with her tiny fingers. You could see I was the only one she could trust her precious life. She might have thought this bathing business was torture. It was horrible and risky, and dangerous. She'd have to try and save herself by hanging on to a finger, the finger of her strong, brave elder brother. When I realized all this and finally understood how scared the poor baby was I started loving her right away.

A GIRL ON A BALL

One day our class went on an outing to the circus. I was very excited, because I'd only been to the circus twice before in my life and that was a long time ago. Lena's only six, but she's been to the circus three times. It's really not fair. Anyway, my class was going to the circus, and I was glad I was much older now, because this time I'd see the performance properly.

The first time I was in the circus I was still a baby and didn't understand what it was all about. When some acrobats entered the ring and one jumped on another one's shoulders I laughed my head off, because I thought they were clowning. I'd never seen grown men climbing on each other's heads and shoulders. That's why I burst out laughing. I didn't know how hard it was.

I remember I kept watching the brass band. The conductor was waving his baton but none of the musicians even looked at him. The drummer and all the rest of them even just played away. While I was so busy watching the band the circus performers were going through their acts, but I wasn't paying any attention to them and so missed most of the show. Which just goes to show what a silly baby I was then.

Here we were now at the circus, my whole class and me. I liked the smells of the circus, the bright posters and bright lights, the beautiful carpet that covered the ring, the high ceiling and all the shiny metal swings and bars way up there.

The band began to play. Everybody rushed to their seats. Then we bought ice cream from an ice cream vendor. Suddenly a whole troop of people dressed in flashy red costumes with yellow stripes came out from behind a red curtain. They lined up along both sides of the curtain and then their chief, who was wearing a black suit, walked through the double line. He said something I couldn't catch in a loud voice. Then the band began to play very fast.

A juggler came on. He was great. He kept tossing up small balls, ten or a hundred at a time, and catching them. Then he started fooling around with a striped rubber ball, butting it, rolling it down his back, kicking it up with his heel, and all the time the ball never stopped rolling up and down his body. You'd think it was magnetized. It was really something. All of a sudden he tossed the striped ball into the audience. That's when the fun really began, because I caught

it and threw it to Valery. He threw it to Misha. Misha decided to throw it to the conductor, but missed and hit the bass drum instead. Bang! The drummer got mad and tossed the ball back to the juggler, but it fell short and hit a lady's hairdo, knocking it lopsided. We nearly died laughing. We kept on laughing after the juggler'd disappeared behind the curtain.

Then an attendant rolled a huge blue ball into the ring. The man who did the announcing came out and shouted something I couldn't understand. I couldn't make out a single word of what he'd said. The band started playing again. It was something lively but not as fast as before.

Then a little girl ran into the ring. I'd never seen such a pretty girl before. She had on a silver dress and a filmy cape. She had long arms which she waved like a bird. She jumped onto the huge blue ball and stood there. Then she started running on it. I thought she was going to jump off it again, but the ball began to roll. She kept running on it, making it roll around the ring.

I'd never seen a girl like her before. All the girls I knew were plain, ordinary girls. This girl was not like any of them. Her small feet kept running on top of the ball, just as if she was on a smooth floor. The blue ball took her wherever she wanted to go: backwards and forwards, left and right. She kept laughing as she ran and looked like she was sailing along. I decided she was probably Thumbelina, because she was so small, so pretty and so wonderful.

Then she stopped. An attendant handed her some bracelets hung with little golden bells. She slipped them over her hands and feet. Then she began circling around on the ball again. She seemed to be dancing. The band played very softly. We could hear the golden bells tinkling on her long arms. It was like a fairytale.



Then the lights went out. The girl glowed in the dark. She was floating slowly around the ring, glowing and tinkling. It was wonderful. I'd never seen anything

like it.

When the lights went on again everyone clapped and shouted Bravo! I did, too. The girl jumped off the ball and ran towards us. As she was running she suddenly did a somersault, then another and another, until I was afraid she'd crash into the rail. I was so scared I jumped up and wanted to rush down and catch her, and save her, but she suddenly stopped and threw out her long arms. The band stopped playing. She stood there, smiling. Everybody clapped as hard as they could and some people even stamped their feet.

Just then the girl looked at me. I could see she knew I was looking at her and knew I could see she was looking at me, too. She waved to me and smiled. She'd waved to me alone and smiled at me alone! I wanted to run down to her again and even stretched my hands out, but she suddenly blew us all a kiss and ran off behind the red curtain, just like the juggler had done.

Then a clown appeared. He was carrying a rooster and began sneezing and falling, but I couldn't care less.

I kept thinking about the girl on the ball, about the wonderful girl who'd waved to me and smiled at me, and I didn't feel like watching any of the other performers. In fact, I shut my eyes tight so's not to see the clown or his red ball of a nose, because he interfered with my thinking about the girl. I could still see her dancing on the blue ball.

After that there was an intermission. All the kids ran down to the snack bar, but I went down to the ring and the red curtain. I wanted to see the girl again, so I stood by the curtain and waited, hoping she'd come out. She didn't.

There was a lion act after the intermission. I didn't like the way the lion-tamer kept dragging the lions around by their tails as if they were dead cats. He made them change places all the time and then made them lie down side by side so he could walk over them. What'd he think they were, a rug? They looked like they wished he'd leave them alone. It was no fun watching them, because lions should race across the prairie, hunting bison and roaring to make the earth shake. These weren't lions. I didn't know what they were.

After the performance was over we went home. All the way home I kept thinking about the girl on the blue ball.

"How'd you like the circus?" Daddy asked that evening.

"You know, there was a girl there. She danced on a blue ball. She was wonderful. I liked her best of all. She smiled at me and waved. Just at me. Honest! Isn't that something, Daddy? Let's go again next Sunday so you can see her."

"Yes, let's. I love the circus."

Mommy gave us a funny look. You'd think she never saw either of us before.

That was the beginning of one of the longest weeks ever. I ate, went to school, got up, went to bed, played and even fought. Still, each and every day I kept wishing it was Sunday so Daddy and I could go to the circus. I'd see the girl on the ball again, and so would Daddy. Maybe he'd even ask her to come and visit us. I'd give her my toy revolver and I'd draw a sailing ship for her.

On Sunday Daddy couldn't go. Some of the men from his office came over.

They had charts spread out all over and shouted and smoked, and drank tea and stayed very late. When they finally left, Mommy had a splitting headache. As Daddy was rolling up his charts he said,

"We'll go next Sunday, Dennis. My word of honor."

I don't know how that week passed, because all I did was wait for Sunday. Daddy didn't fool me this time. He got us tickets in the second row. I was glad we were sitting so close to the ring. The performance began. I kept waiting for the girl on the ball, but the man who announced the program kept presenting other acts, one after another, but not the girl. I was so jittery I was trembling. I was dying for Daddy to see how wonderful she was when she danced on her blue ball in her silver dress and filmy cape. Each time the announcer appeared I whispered,

"He'll announce her now!"

But he seemed to be announcing other acts just for spite. I was beginning to hate him.

"I wish he'd shut up! What's he announcing? That's not interesting!" I kept saying.

Daddy had his eyes on the ring, each time he'd say, "Stop talking. It's a wonderful act."

I decided he didn't know much about the circus if he could like those kind of acts. I could just imagine what he'd say when he saw the girl on the ball. He'd probably jump up and hit the ceiling.

Then the announcer came out and shouted in his strange kind of voice, "In-ter-mis-sion!"

I was stunned. Intermission? How come? The lion act would go on after intermission. Where was the girl on the ball? Why hadn't she come on? Was she sick? What if she'd fallen off the ball and broken her leg?

"Come on, Daddy. Let's find out where she is."

"Indeed. Where can she be? Let's buy a program." Daddy seemed quite pleased. He looked around, smiled and said, "Ah, how I love the circus! The circus smells make my head swim."

We went out into the foyer. It was very crowded. Vendors were selling candy and soft drinks. The walls were hung with tigers' mugs. We finally found an usher who was selling programs. Daddy bought one. I was too impatient to wait till he'd read it through so I asked the usher,

"Can you tell me when the girl on the ball is on?"

"What girl?"

"It says here: 'Tanya Vorontsova. Balancing Act on a Ball.' When'll she be on?" Daddy asked.

"Oh! You mean Tanya? She's gone. They've gone on tour. You just missed them."

I was speechless.

"We've been waiting to see her these past two weeks," Daddy said, "and now you say she's gone."

"Yes. She's gone. She left with her parents. Her parents are 'The Flying Vorontsovs'. Ever heard of them? Too bad. They just left yesterday."

"There! See, Daddy?"

"I didn't know she'd be leaving. What a shame. There's nothing we can do about it then," Daddy said.

"Are you absolutely, positively sure she's gone?" I asked the usher.

"Absolutely."

"And you don't even know where she is?"

"They've gone to Vladivostok."

So that's where they were. Vladivostok. It was so far away. At the far edge of the map, way off on the right-hand side.

"It's so far away," I said.

The usher suddenly seemed in a hurry. "You'll have to go back to your seats now. The lights are dimming," she said.

"Come on, Dennis! Next is the lion act. Don't you want to hear them growl? Come on!" Daddy said.

"Let's go home, Daddy."

"That's a nice how-d'you-do."

The usher smiled. We went out to the cloakroom, got our coats and left. We were walking slowly along the boulevard. After a long while I said,

"Vladivostok is as far away from Moscow on the map as you can get. It'll take forever to get there by train."

Daddy didn't say anything. He seemed to be thinking about something. We kept on walking. After a while I suddenly remembered there were airplanes, too, and said,

"But it'll only take three hours by plane."

Daddy didn't say anything this time, either. He was walking along, holding my hand. When we got to Gorky Street he said,

"Let's go to the ice cream parlor. We'll order two portions each. What d'you say?"

"I don't feel like it, Daddy."

"They've got a soft drink there called Baikal. I've never tasted anything like it in my life."

"I really don't feel like it, Daddy."

He didn't try to coax me. He began walking faster and squeezed my hand so hard it hurt. I could barely keep up with him. Why was he walking so fast? Why didn't he say anything? I looked up at him. His face was very serious and sad.